

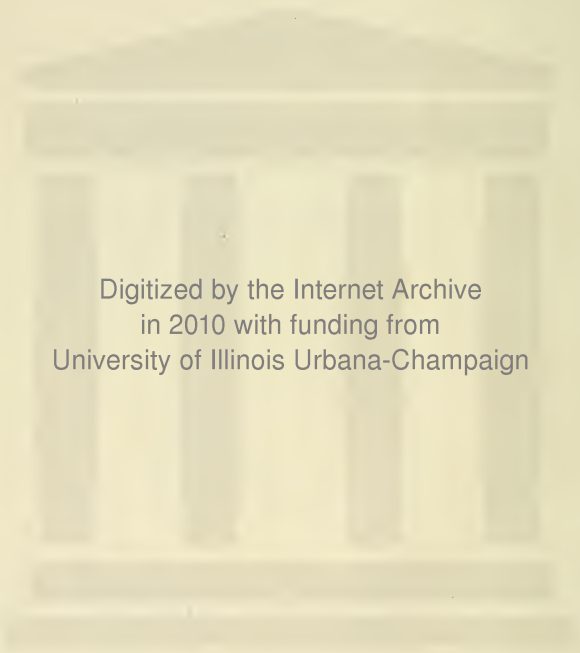
Mary Eleanor Wood

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THE
HOUSE OF HALLIWELL

A Novel

BY
MRS. HENRY WOOD

AUTHOR OF
"EAST LYNNE," "THE CHANNINGS," "JOHNNY LUDLOW,"
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. II.



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THE
HOUSE OF HALLIWELL.

CHAPTER I.

LUCY'S ADVENTURE.

MEANWHILE they began to be actively engaged, getting Lucy ready for 'her wedding. One morning they were in the midst of work, Miss Bowen, the dressmaker, having gone to them for the day, when they saw Captain Kerleton approaching the house. Lucy told Phœbe to say they were engaged, but would see him in the afternoon.

But the Captain sent word up he had something very particular to communicate to Miss Lucy ; so she had to go to him.

The Captain wanted her to go for a walk, with, of course, Hester or Aunt Copp, for she was not in the habit of walking out alone with him. Which was the "particular communication" he had to make.

"It is out of my power this morning," Lucy replied. "We have some work about, which we cannot quit."

"Leave them to do it," advised the Captain ; "you come for a walk. Come by yourself : never mind what that old Aunt Copp says."

"They cannot do without me," explained Lucy. "The dressmaker is cutting out my morning dresses, and I must be there that she may try them on."

"Put it off till to-morrow," urged the Captain. "Work can be done one day as

well as another. See what a splendid morning it is."

"Miss Bowen will not be here to-morrow," answered Lucy. "Indeed I cannot leave them now."

"But I want you to come," persisted Captain Kerleton, somewhat after the fractious manner of a spoiled child. "You must come. You'll never go and set up your rubbish of work in opposition to my wishes, Miss Lucy?"

"Do not put it in that light," said Lucy gently. "My dresses must be tried on, or they cannot be made; and if I went out they would all be at a standstill. I shall be most happy to go with you later in the day."

"Then you will not grant me this simple favour?"

"I cannot," returned Lucy, and away rushed the Captain, dashing to the front door, and stamping across the road.

In the evening he arrived again. They were at tea, taking it in the workroom for convenience' sake, when Phœbe entered and said the Captain wanted to speak to Hester. "Not Miss Lucy," Phœbe repeated, "Miss Hester." Hester went downstairs. Captain Kerleton was sitting in the easy-chair, looking red and excited.

"Do you know how she behaved to me this morning?" he began, without preface or ceremony.

"Who?" asked Hester.

"She. Miss Lucy. I asked her, as the greatest favour, to go for a little walk with me, and she told me to my face that she would not."

"She really could not, Captain Kerleton," said Hester. "I have no doubt she would have liked to do so. You must not fancy she acted from caprice: Lucy is not capable of it."

"She told me there was some trash of sewing going on, and she had to stop in for it."

"It was the case."

"Well," returned the Captain, speaking in that dogged, obstinate manner which now and then came over him, "I look upon it in this light. When a young lady, who has promised to be your wife, makes an excuse that she can't go out with you, it is equivalent to saying she wants to break matters off. That is how I have taken it."

"Break—what?" uttered Hester, staring at the Captain, and feeling as if she were turning into a cold perspiration.

"Why, I conclude that Miss Lucy wished to make known, in a roundabout way, that she was tired of me. And I have acted upon it."

"Dear Captain Kerleton, you are entirely mistaken," said Hester. "I can assure you

Lucy is perfectly faithful to you. The work she had to stay in for was in preparation for her marriage."

"It's too late now," said the Captain, with redoubled obstinacy, "for I think I know somebody who would suit me better."

Hester sat opposite to him, glued to her chair, unable to utter a word, and wondering whether he had taken leave of his senses. He, however, was not glued to his, for he suddenly rose from it, and dropped down on his knees close to Hester.

"My dear Miss Hester, it's you and nobody else. I do think you the most charming, amiable creature; and I have transferred my affections from Miss Lucy to you. Will you have me?"

Hester was never so taken back in her life, and a suspicion did cross her, in earnest, that Lucy's refusal in the morning must have put the Captain's brains to flight. He took

forcible possession of her hands, and would neither get up nor let her do so. While they were in this ridiculous position, who should come bustling into the room, with the sugar-basin, but Aunt Copp.

“Why, what on earth—Hester! what’s the matter?”

The Captain took a move sideways on his knees, and addressed himself to Aunt Copp, which afforded an opportunity to Hester of rising.

“Miss Lucy has cut me, ma’am. That is, she acted—purposely—so as to make me cut her; and my affections are now fixed on Miss Hester. I was on the point of praying her to name her own day for our union, when you interrupted us.”

“Good patience deliver us!” ejaculated Aunt Copp, her mouth opening with astonishment, and remaining so. “What is all this?”

Hester could not speak for laughing then,

the whole thing struck her as so supremely absurd. There knelt Captain Kerleton, in the everlasting regimentals, his hands thrown theatrically out towards Mrs. Copp, and his face twisted into a die-away expression towards Hester, while Aunt Copp stood arrested in the middle of the room, one hand grasping the sugar-basin, the other the silver tongs, her face turning to petrification, and her eyes rolling from one to the other in a sort of horror.

“Niece Hester, what *is* this? I insist upon knowing.”

“I think Captain Kerleton meant to play off a little joke with me, Aunt Copp,” she answered. “Lucy, it seems, offended him this morning; but they will make it all right again.”

“But, by heaven, it is no joke, Miss Hester,” interrupted the Captain, springing up. “I mean it as real earnest.”

"Then allow me to assure you, Captain Kerleton, that I shall never treat it but as a joke, now and always," Hester impressively whispered. "And pray let neither of us recur to it again, even in thought."

"Then you won't have me? You mean to insinuate that?" he reiterated aloud, pulling a face as long as his arm.

"I would not have you, Captain Kerleton, if you were worth your weight in gold," she said. "So let the joke pass away, and we had better say nothing about it to Lucy."

"Highty-tighty," cried Aunt Copp, recovering from her petrification and going forward; "but you can't do these things, Captain. Shake off one sister and take up another! I see what it is: you have been getting up your temper because Lucy crossed your whim this morning. So now you must get it down again. We were just going out to take a walk, and the best thing you can do

is to go with us. Why, you would be as bad as a sailor."

"A sailor?" sullenly repeated the Captain.

"Yes, sir, a sailor. They have sweethearts by the dozen, in each port, and that's well known. Many's the wrangle I have had with my boy about that: he vowing, by all that's blue, that *he* had not, and I knowing he had. Don't tell me. But you can't have two in a house, Captain. So sit down there and get cool while we put our things on."

He went out with Aunt Copp and Lucy. Hester remained at home, truly uncomfortable, and deliberating whether she ought not to tell Lucy what had taken place. For if the thing were not a joke—as she kept trying to persuade herself, though the more she tried, the more incomprehensible a joke it grew—was a man capable of these violent changes and fits of temper one to whom they ought to entrust Lucy?

The following day dawned, and they all rose as usual, little thinking what it was to bring forth. For how many a one has a day risen in happiness to close in sorrow, dark as the darkest night! It was not strictly sorrow, however, that came to them; rather mortification. Lucy went out to spend the day with some friends, who had invited her for a farewell visit previous to her marriage; and as Hester and Aunt Copp were seated at work, after dinner, the latter spoke.

“Well, I think I must have made a kaleidoscope of my spectacles, for he is ever changing; now it is he, now it is not! Hester, *is* that the Captain, or not?”

Hester followed the direction of her aunt's eyes, which were fixed on a gentleman who was advancing up the road in face of them. “Yes—no—yes,” was her contradictory reply. “I declare, Aunt Copp, I am not sure. One

minute it looks like him, and the next it does not. If it is the Captain, he has discarded his regimentals."

It was not Captain Kerleton, but one who bore a striking resemblance to him.

"I know!" exclaimed Aunt Copp, with awakened interest. "It is his brother. I wrote for him."

"You, Aunt Copp?"

"Yes, to come to the wedding. But I told him to wait for a second letter. He is come too soon."

Phœbe brought in a card, "Major Kerleton," and ushered in the Major after it, a cordial-mannered man. He proceeded to explain his business, and poor Aunt Copp was ready to sink through her chair with vexation, for it was she who had been the means of introducing the Captain to Seaford, and—worse still—to Lucy.

All that they had observed as strange in

his conduct was now accounted for. *Captain Kerleton was a lunatic.* Some years previously, when in India, he had met with an accident, which caused concussion of the brain, and he had never entirely recovered his intellect. At that time the Captain was on the point of marriage with a young lady to whom he was much attached, but the match was then broken off, and this seemed to have left some impression on his mind, which it could not get rid of. He came home, and had since lived with his brother, and years had wrought so much improvement in him that he would pass muster in society without suspicion, as he had done at Seaford : the only point on which his intellects were still wrong was a propensity to make offers of marriage. "I have had no end of trouble with him on this score," said the Major, "for if he has made a fool of one lady in the last eight years, he has of fifty. Of course, when

I am on the spot, I whisper a word, and matters are soon rectified ; but once or twice, when he has taken advantage of my absence from home to start off, as he did this time, there has been more trouble to get them straight. It is five years ago this summer," continued the Major, lowering his voice, "that he found his way into Yorkshire. I was taken ill—seriously ill—on my journey, and was absent longer than I had ever been. By George! when I came back, and proceeded to hunt up Richard, I found him a married man."

"A married man!" uttered Mrs. Copp.

"He had gammoned some young lady into marrying him: a very nice sort of girl she was, too; of respectable family. But they were poor, thought they had a catch in Dick, and hurried on the match."

"Mercy on us!" breathed Aunt Copp. "Is she living?"

“To be sure she is. She——”

“Why, then, the Captain is a married man now,” she screamed, unceremoniously interrupting Major Kerleton.

“Neither more nor less,” returned the Major. “When his young wife, poor thing, found out Dick’s infirmity, she refused to remain with him—and quite right of her, too, I think. She has lived since then on the Continent with a married sister ; Dick—or, at least, I, for him—allowing her a yearly income.”

“But what a wicked man he must be to attempt to marry my niece when he has a wife living,” remonstrated Aunt Copp.

“Not wicked,” interposed the Major. “Upon this point Richard is *insane* ; the doctors say incurably so. He would marry twenty wives if he could get the opportunity, and never know that he was doing wrong.”

“A regular Bluebeard ! He ought to be

tried for bigamy," groaned Aunt Copp. "But it has been a blessed escape for Lucy."

"It has indeed. Not but that I am sincerely grieved he should ever have been brought into contact with your niece, for this *exposé* cannot be a pleasant one for her. He left home, it seems, the very day I did, and must have lost no time."

"He ought to be confined," said Mrs. Copp.

"He is so sane on other points, that to confine him would be scarcely justifiable," returned the Major. "But I shall learn a lesson by this last vagary, and shall place a watch over him, if I have to leave home again."

"Sane on other points!" repeated Aunt Copp; "I don't know about that. He seems to have unlimited command of money."

"Not unlimited. His fortune is a large one, and he has command over a portion of it."

“Perhaps you’ll walk this way, sir,” said Mrs. Copp, rising, and leading the way upstairs to a spare bedroom. Hester followed. “There!” she said, exhibiting the curious lot of presents Lucy had received, “perhaps you can tell me what is to be done with all these, Major Kerleton? The Captain sent them here, and we could not stop him.”

Major Kerleton laughed heartily. “Poor Dick!” he said, “this is another of his tricks. He gives away all before him.”

“He has supplied the parish here,” was Aunt Copp’s rejoinder. “What is to be done with these?”

“Whatever you please. If there are any worth keeping, pray retain them. The rest dispose of any way—throw them away if they are no better worth.”

“Several of the articles are of value. The watch and chain especially, and some rings. But, sir,” and Mrs. Copp drew herself up to

her full height, "my niece will not allow her to keep them, or anything else."

"I hope and trust she will," warmly returned the Major. "I shall pray Miss Lucy to accept them *from me*. Ah, my dear ladies," he continued, taking a hand of each, "I only wish it was in my power to make any reparation to her for the annoyance which my unfortunate brother has brought on her and you. Pecuniary compensation is out of the question, but——"

"Sir!" interrupted Aunt Copp, in an awful voice, "do you know that you are addressing persons of your own standing in life?—the sister and daughter of one who was of your own rank, the Major Halliwell. He traces his descent to nobility, and not far distant. In George the Third's time——"

"My dear lady, you are mistaking me. I was about to say that the only compensation possible is the sincere expression of my heart-

felt and genuine sympathy ; it is not in my power to offer any other."

"Not any," responded Aunt Copp, with stony rigidity. "The sooner such a lunatic as he is out of Seaford the better for all parties."

So thought Major Kerleton ; and he started that same day with the poor mad-man for London.

Of course the event to Lucy Halliwell could not be otherwise than deeply mortifying, but her heart had never been engaged in it, and she soon grew to laugh at it heartily. They took to calling it "Lucy's Adventure," for it was the only romantic incident that ever happened to Lucy.

What was now to be the career of Hester and Lucy Halliwell ? The year in their home at Seaford had expired ; they had their £500 each, and must look out for some

means of earning a livelihood. It is certain that young women in a respectable sphere of life, when left unprovided for by the death of parents, require more sympathy than any other class. It may be they have a little money : it is to be hoped that daughters so left generally have. This they proceed to embark in various ways, according to their capacities and the ideas they have imbibed in their station in society. But let the reader be very sure that there are few of these unprotected women but have to bear a crushing weight of struggle and sorrow. Anxious perplexity, pinching want, heart-breaking care—these are often theirs ; and for many there is no turn, no worldly rest, till they find it in the grave.

Aunt Copp, who remained with them to wind up affairs at Seaford, proposed several things. One was that Lucy should go out as governess, for which she was so well

qualified, and that Hester should have a home with her in Liverpool, which she would be proud and happy to give her, she observed, and turn over to her all the sewing and pudding-making. But they decided, themselves, upon establishing a ladies' boarding-school. It appeared more congenial to them than anything else, and they both felt that they had the qualifications and will to do their *full duty* to the children who might be entrusted to their care : Hester in contributing to their comforts, and teaching them, as she phrased it, plain sewing and grammar and spelling ; Lucy in imparting her own high standard of education and accomplishments.

Where was it to be ? They decided upon the neighbourhood of London, and departed for the great city ; but they had much trouble to settle themselves. Some of the suburbs they found overstocked with schools, some

were not deemed highly healthy, some had no suitable house that they could rent. They did settle themselves at last, after spending a purse of money, as they said, over those whirling omnibuses. The precise locality need not be named, but it is a well-known one. They took a capital house, large and convenient, enclosed from the high road by a wall, with a pretty garden in front, and a playground behind. They paid eighty pounds a year for it, besides taxes—a rent that frightened them. Quarter-day never drew near for many years but it brought to them a heart-sickening. The next step was to furnish. The furniture from their old home was the worse for wear, and though it had filled a small house, it was lost in a large one. So they bought new for the drawing-room and for the children's bedroom that was to be, with desks and forms for the schoolroom, disposing the old about

the house as they best could, and occasionally, as time went on, buying some almost indispensable article, as they thought they could spare the money.

Of course they had sent out cards and advertised, and then they sat down in their new house and waited for pupils. The first quarter they received some demands for circulars, but nothing came of it; the next they had three day-scholars, two sisters and another. Hester then took the resolution to call at the principal houses in the neighbourhood and urge her hope of patronage. Whether they liked her appearance she did not know, but soon after that they had eleven day-scholars and five boarders; so they thought success was coming all at once, and had indistinct visions of retiring with a fortune.



CHAPTER II.

THE PHYSICIAN AND HIS WIFE.

SPRING was succeeding to a certain long and sharp winter ; but the mornings and evenings were dreary, and the east wind which prevailed penetrated to the very warmest house in Wexborough—a fashionable town for invalids, noted all over England for its salubrity. That east wind had struck inflammation to the chest of a lovely child, and was quickly carrying it away. It lay on its mother's knee before the fire. She, the mother, was young and very pretty, but delicate and careworn. Her whole

heart was bound up in this child, and she would not believe but that it was recovering.

“Don’t you think it looks a little better than it did this morning?” she anxiously asked, raising her eyes to her husband, who had come in and was standing near.

He made an evasive reply, for he was a physician, and he knew that the child was dying. At that moment there was a knock at the front door, and they heard the maid show the visitor into the consulting-room—their only servant, for they were very poor, the physician trying to struggle into practice.

“It’s Mr. Fairfax, sir,” she said, entering the room.

Now Mr. Fairfax was Dr. Elliot’s landlord, and the physician, for certain reasons, would rather have had a visit from any man, living or dead, than from him. He broke out into an impatient word, and demanded

sharply of the girl why she admitted *him*. She was beginning an explanation, but he would not stop to hear it.

“Well, doctor,” began Mr. Fairfax, who owned no end of property in Wexborough, “I am not come upon my usual visit, and that I told your girl, for I saw she was preparing the old answer. You know that house of mine in the Crescent, which was to be let furnished?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it is let, and the people have arrived to-day. A lady and gentleman and several servants—plenty of money there seems to be there. The gentleman appears in bad health, and they asked me to recommend a physician. So I mentioned you.”

“I am very much obliged to you,” said Dr. Elliot, with animation.

“Yes, but, doctor, we don’t do anything for nothing in this world. I shall expect

part of your fees to be handed to me for back rent. Without my recommendation, you would never have got in there, for I need not remind you that there are physicians in Wexborough longer established and more popular than you. Out of every guinea you must give me half. Is it a bargain?"

"It is," answered Dr. Elliot. "Honour bright."

"Then put on your hat, and go up at once. They want to see you to-night. Number nine."

Dr. Elliot soon reached the Crescent. His patient was seated in a room alone. One leg, cased in flannel, was raised on a foot-rest. Glasses and dessert were on the table, though more from custom than for use. Dr. Elliot's card had preceded him, and the servant had placed a chair.

"They have brought me here for a change

of air," he said to Dr. Elliot, after speaking of his illness; "but I have little faith, myself, in any change being beneficial. Such a complication of disorders! And now this attack of gout, worse than any I ever had. I am a young man to have gout, doctor, but it is hereditary in my family."

"Yes," replied Dr. Elliot. "You have perhaps—excuse me, but I ought to know all your case—been a free liver?"

"Pretty well for that: though not more so than other country gentlemen addicted to field sports, and latterly I have been obliged to be abstemious."

When Dr. Elliot was writing the prescription, it occurred to him that Mr. Fairfax had not mentioned the name, so he asked it now. Turnberry, he thought was the reply, but his patient was taken with a fit of coughing at the moment. He wrote it "—— Turnberry, Esquire." As he was

leaving the house, a servant came up and said his mistress wished to see him before he went.

The lady stood in the drawing-room when Dr. Elliot entered, the rays of the chandelier falling upon her. He was struck with amazement at her beauty. A tall, stately woman of eight-and-twenty, her eyes haughty, her complexion brilliant, her features of exquisite contour.

She began to speak ; he began to speak ; but neither finished. Both stood, awed to silence, for they had recognised each other, and to neither was the recognition palatable. It was Mrs. Turnbull, not Turnberry, and Dr. Elliot saw in her the sister of his wife, once Clara Freer. *She* saw in him the handsome, harum - scarum young medical student, Tom Elliot, whom she had admired, if not loved, ere he had declared his preference for her sister. That was eight years ago, and no communication had been held

between the families since. Tom Elliot's friends had helped him while he finished his studies, obtained his diploma, and became Dr. Elliot. Since then, he had set up at Wexborough, and had been living on, he hardly knew how, waiting for practice : his wife would have said, struggling on.

Dr. Elliot held out his hand to Mrs. Turnbull. "May I hope that the lapse of time has softened your feelings towards me?" he said, in low, persuasive tones—and none knew how to speak more persuasively than he. "Now that we have been brought together in this strange way, let me implore a reconciliation—for Louisa's sake."

Mrs. Turnbull, after a moment's hesitation, put her hand into his. "For Louisa's sake," she repeated. "Are you living in Wexborough? Have you a flourishing practice?"

"Not flourishing. Practice comes slowly to beginners."

“How is Louisa? Is she much altered?”

“Very much, I think. The loss of her children has had a great effect upon her.”

“Ah! you have children, then?” And the old jealous feeling of bygone days came over Mrs. Turnbull. She had had none.

“Yes, we have been unfortunate in them all, save the eldest. I have left one at home now in Louisa’s arms, dying.”

Mrs. Turnbull was shocked, and a better feeling returned to her. “I should like to see Louisa,” she exclaimed. “Suppose I go now?”

“Now!” cried Dr. Elliot, in dismayed tones, as he thought of the inward signs of poverty in his house, and its disordered appearance just then. “But we are all at sixes and sevens to-night, with this dying child.”

“Oh, I can allow for that: I know what illness is. I have seen enough of it since I

married Squire Turnbull. Wait one moment, and I will go with you."

She had possessed a will of her own as Clara Freer, and she had not parted with it as Mrs. Turnbull. She called for her bonnet and cloak, and then went into the dining-room to her husband. He looked surprised, as well he might, to see her going out in the dusk of evening, in a strange town.

"Did you recognise him?" she said, leaning over her husband's chair.

"Recognise him!" repeated Squire Turnbull, not understanding. "He is a clever man, I think; seems to know what he is about. Young, though. His name is"—running his eyes over the card—"Elliot. 'Dr. Elliot.'"

"He is metamorphosed into 'doctor' now. He was Tom Elliot when he ran away with Louisa."

"By Jingo! it's never that Tom Elliot!" uttered the astonished Squire. "Is *he* Louisa's

husband? Well, it did strike me that I had seen his face before."

"He is Louisa's husband, and she is in trouble, he says. A child of theirs is dying—now—to-night—as I understand. I fancy, too, they are in poverty," she added, "which of course was only to be expected, acting as they did. But he asked me to let bygones be bygones, for Louisa's sake, and I am going to see her."

"Bygones! of course let them be bygones," cried the warm-hearted Squire; "why not? I have always blamed your father for holding out about it. It was done, and couldn't be helped; and the only remedy left was to make the best of it. A dying child! poverty! I say, Clara, don't forget that we have abundance of everything, money included. Let your hand be open, wife, if wanted. Poor Loo!"

She went out, leaving the Squire to his reflections. They carried him back, naturally,

to that old time, eight years ago. He had admired Louisa Freer then, and wished to marry her, but Mr. Tom Elliot forestalled him. He had then, after some delay, transferred his proposals to the elder sister, and they were accepted. To be mistress of Turnbull Park, and two thousand a year, was a position any lawyer's daughter might covet. Clara did, and gained it.

It was a strange meeting, the two sisters coming together, in that unexpected manner, after so many years of estrangement. Oh! the contrast between them! Mrs. Elliot pale, haggard, unhappy, her gown a faded merino, and her hair little cared for : Clara, who had thrown off her mantle, in an evening dress of black velvet, its low body and sleeves trimmed with rich white lace, and gold ornaments decorating her neck, her arms and luxuriant hair! More beautiful she was, more beautiful altogether, than of yore.

There arose now, from a stool at his mother's feet, a lovely boy of seven years old ; tall, healthy and straight as a dart. He fixed his large brown eyes on the stranger's face ; but he was not dressed very well, and Dr. Elliot, muttering something about "William's bedtime," took him out of the room.

"What a noble boy !" involuntarily exclaimed Mrs. Turnbull, gazing after him ; "what an intellectual countenance ! He is your eldest, I presume, and this was your youngest."

Was ! She unconsciously spoke of the infant in the past tense, for she had noticed its ghastly face and laboured breathing. Very, very fast was its life ebbing now.

"How many children have you ?" inquired Mrs. Elliot.

"None." And there was something in the tone of the short answer which told that the subject was a sore one.

“You are well off!” vehemently spoke Mrs. Elliot. “Better never have them than have them only to lose them. William was born within the first year of our marriage, and then for nearly three years I had no more children. I did so wish for a girl—as did my husband. How I longed for it I cannot tell you. The passionate appeal of Rachel I understood then—‘Give me children, or else I die.’ Well, a girl was born; but born to die: then another was born; but born to die: now this one, who has stayed longer with me than they, for she is fourteen months old—now this one is about to die! You are well off.”

“Is Dr. Elliot a good husband to you?” questioned Mrs. Turnbull.

“He is a kind husband—yes—generally speaking,” was the reply of Mrs. Elliot, while a vivid blush dyed her pale cheek. “But he is fond of pleasure—not altogether what may

be called a domestic husband. And now, Clara, dare I ask you of my father? Two years ago I heard that he was living, and I see you are not in mourning."

"He is well and strong. As full of business as ever."

"Does he ever," hesitated Mrs. Elliot, "speak of forgiving me?"

"He has never mentioned you—never once. He was dreadfully incensed at the step you took. And when offended, it is so hard for him to forgive. You must remember that, Louisa."

"I wrote to him when Willy was born. And again when I lost my first little girl."

"Indeed!" cried Mrs. Turnbull. "He never told me. What was the result?"

"Both times the same. He returned the letters in a blank cover. It is not that I want assistance from him, but I should like forgiveness."

“But some assistance would not be unwelcome, I presume.”

“Oh, we can manage to get along. I suppose it is only right that straitened circumstances should follow such a marriage as ours. If I craved help for anything, it would be for the boy. He is a most intelligent child—as you saw by his eyes and countenance—can read as well as I can. But it is time his education was begun in earnest.”

“Will you give him to me?” eagerly asked Mrs. Turnbull. “I will adopt him and do by him as if he were my own. Unless I am mistaken, you are shortly in expectation of another infant.”

“It is so,” answered Mrs. Elliot. “Night and day, since there has been a fear of losing this one, have I prayed it might be a girl.”

“Then you can spare me the boy. Talk it over with Dr. Elliot. It is only to lend

him, you know, Louisa ; and remember, the advantages to him will be great."

Mrs. Elliot did talk over with her husband Mrs. Turnbull's offer, and they were both of opinion that one so desirable should not be refused. Therefore, when Mr. and Mrs. Turnbull departed for Turnbull Park, William Elliot accompanied them. The little girl had died.

The following year they returned to Wexborough. Dr. and Mrs. Elliot were progressing but little better : practice was very slow in coming to him. They hardly knew William : he was wonderfully improved. Dressed in costly habits, accustomed now to luxury, servants, a pony at his command, and his education pressed on, it was indeed an alteration for him. But his sweet disposition had not changed, and he met his parents with a burst of emotion that

astonished them. He came every day to see them, but his home was still with Mrs. Turnbull.

Not long had Mr. and Mrs. Turnbull been at Wexborough this second time before a disagreeable feeling which during their former visit had stolen like a shadow over Mrs. Elliot's heart rose again. Like a shadow, indeed, for she would not *allow* herself to notice it then, and with their departure had dismissed it from her thoughts, never, she sincerely hoped, to recall it. Yet now it was forcing itself upon her with redoubled vigour—the suspicion that her husband admired, not in too brotherly a way, Mrs. Turnbull; that there was too good an understanding between them. Not that Mrs. Elliot feared anything like guilt. Oh no! Whatever opinion she might have formed, or had cause to form, of her husband's laxity of morals during their married life, she was

perfectly sure of her sister's principles ; but that an undue attachment for each other's society had grown up was very evident. On Mrs. Turnbull's part it was probably nothing beyond gratified vanity ; but Louisa had never forgotten how Clara had once confessed to something very like love for Tom Elliot. Louisa had then thought that his love and his admiration were given to none but herself ; she now knew that at least his admiration was given to every handsome woman who came in his way. Few had he fallen in with so beautiful as Mrs. Turnbull ; he was at no pains to conceal his sense of it, and she repulsed not the marked attentions of the very handsome physician. But all this was disagreeable to Mrs. Elliot, and as the weeks of the 'Turnbulls' second sojourn at Wexborough lengthened into months, and her husband passed more and more of his time with Mrs. Turnbull, it jarred not only

on her feelings, but on her temper. Existence seemed to possess for her but two phases : passionate love for her little baby-girl and jealousy for her husband and sister. Never yet had she breathed a word of this unpleasantness to Dr. Elliot, but she was naturally of a hasty spirit, and the explosion was sure to come.

One afternoon, as she stood at her window, holding her babe, she saw her sister and William coming down the street. Then she saw her husband meet them, draw Mrs. Turnbull's arm within his, and lead her in. William came running up to the sitting-room.

"Where is your aunt, Willy?" she said, as she stooped to kiss him.

"She is gone with papa into his consulting-room. Mamma, who do you think is come to Uncle Turnbull's?"

Mrs. Elliot did not heed him : she was listening for any sound from downstairs,

jealously tormenting herself with conjectures of what they might be doing—what talking about. Mrs. Turnbull came up shortly.

“I have had the greatest surprise to-day, Louisa,” she exclaimed. “Who do you think came by the mid-day coach?”

Mrs. Elliot answered coldly—that she was not likely to guess.

“Papa.”

“Papa!” repeated Mrs. Elliot, aroused from her brooding thoughts.

“Papa. I never was more surprised. We were at luncheon. The servant—it happened to be the new one who was in waiting—said a gentleman wanted to see me, and in walked my father. It seems he was at Wexborough, on business for one of his clients, and being so near to us, came in this morning. But he leaves to-morrow by the early coach, and is now gone to the Royal Arms to secure a bed. I could not persuade

him to sleep at our house ; he said he should disturb us in the morning."

" Did Willy see him ?" sighed Mrs. Elliot.

" Yes. But papa took little notice of him : he never does when he sees him at the Park. I am going to leave Willy with you for the afternoon, for his presence always seems to cast a restraint on my father. I wish you would give me a glass of wine, Louisa," added Mrs. Turnbull. " I am thirsty."

Mrs. Elliot laid down her infant, and brought forth a decanter of port wine. It was the same as that in Mrs. Turnbull's own cellar, Squire Turnbull having sent in a present of some to Mrs. Elliot.

" I am thirsty too," said William. " Let me have a glass, mamma."

" Wine for you !" exclaimed Mrs. Elliot ; " no, indeed, Willy. When little boys are thirsty, they drink water."

" What nonsense !" interposed Mrs. Turn-

bull. "Give the child some wine, Louisa. It is the fish-sauce we had at luncheon, no doubt, that is making us thirsty."

A half-dispute ensued, carried on good humouredly by Mrs. Turnbull, with bitterness by her sister. The latter handed William a tumbler of water: Mrs. Turnbull ordered him not to drink it till his mamma put some wine into it, and William Elliot, a sensitive child, stood in discomfort, his cheeks crimson, and whispering that he was not thirsty then. Dr. Elliot came in.

"Did you ever know anything like Louisa's absurdity to-day?" Mrs. Turnbull said to him. "Willy is dying with thirst, and I want to put a little drop of wine into that water, instead of letting him drink it cold; but she won't give him wine."

"He shall not have wine," repeated Mrs. Elliot, with acrimony. "It is improper for him."

"Nonsense," muttered Dr. Elliot, and

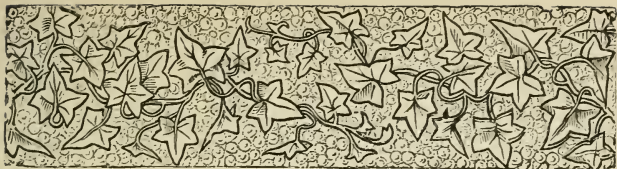
poured some wine into the water, ordering William to drink it. His wife's face and lips turned of a deadly whiteness; with her, the sign of extreme anger. She caught up her babe and left the room.

"I must be going, Louisa," called out Mrs. Turnbull. "My father will have returned from the hotel. Good-bye."

She went downstairs, followed by Dr. Elliot, and Mrs. Elliot saw them walking slowly up the street together. She was boiling over with wrath and indignation.

Willy stole towards her, his little face a picture of sorrow as he timidly strove to utter some words. "Mamma, dearest mamma!" he whispered, bursting into a flood of tears, "I am so sorry I asked for the wine! I did not know you wished me not to have it. I will not ask for any again."

She drew him to her, kissed him passionately, and sobbed with him. But she made no comment to the child.



CHAPTER III.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

DR. ELLIOT did not return to tea ; not, in fact, until it was time to take William home ; and then came the explosion. The physician took it with provoking coolness, began to whistle, and asked whether the boy was ready.

“He never goes back again,” said Mrs. Elliot. “His bed is made up at home.”

“There is no reason why the lad’s interests should suffer because your temper has turned crusty this evening,” observed Dr. Elliot. “He shall certainly go back to Squire Turnbull’s.”

“When a woman can incite a child to disobey his mother, she is no longer fit to have control over him. Mrs. Turnbull shall have no more control over mine.”

“Was it worth while to make a fuss over such a trifle? As if a drop of wine would hurt the boy! Remember the obligations he is under to Mrs. Turnbull.”

“Remember your obligations to me, your wife. I have borne much, Thomas, since we married, but I will not be domineered over by you both conjointly, or tamely see your love given to her.”

“Tamely! — love!” uttered Dr. Elliot.
“What nonsense now, Louisa?”

“Do you think I am blind?” she retorted; “do you think I am a stone, destitute of feeling? Is it not too apparent that all your thoughts, your time, your wishes are given to Mrs. Turnbull?”

“Oh, if you are going to begin on the old

score of jealousy, I have nothing more to say," observed Dr. Elliot carelessly ; "but I think you might exempt your own sister from such suspicions. Harriet!" he called out, throwing open the room door, "put on Master William's things, and send him down."

"I say the child shall not go back," passionately uttered Mrs. Elliot.

"And I say he shall. When you have calmed down to common-sense, Louisa, you will see the folly of sacrificing his advantages of education to your fancies, which are as capricious as they are unjust."

"I will apply to the law—I will apply to the nearest magistrate, rather than have my child forcibly disposed of against my will," she vehemently continued.

"My dear, the law is not on your side, but on mine. A father's authority does not yield to magistrates," laughed Dr. Elliot. To

preserve that nonchalant good humour was, in her present mood, as fuel heaped on fire. She would rather he had struck her.

And the matter ended by his taking William back to Mrs. Turnbull's.

"Loo's furiously savage," he thought to himself as he went. "But she should not take such crotchets into her head."

Mrs. Elliot certainly was "savage" as she sat alone that long evening. Things wore to her jaundiced mind a worse appearance than they really deserved. Her husband was magnified into a sort of demon Don Juan; her sister into a beautiful siren, who lived but to attract him, and rule over her. "Oh! the blind child I was to fly in the face of my friends, and run away with Tom Elliot!" she bitterly exclaimed. "I suppose the act is working out its own punishment; for what a life is mine! Struggling with poverty—losing my idolized children—spurned by my father

—neglected by my husband—patronized by my sister, and compelled to yield my boy to her charge! His education—there it is. It ought to go on, yet we have not the means to pursue it; and never shall have, it seems to me.”

“Why not ask my father?” The question came from her own heart, but with a sudden intensity that startled her into believing that someone at her elbow had whispered it. “Why not go to him now, this very moment, at the hotel, and press it on him?”

Mrs. Elliot was in that excited state that sways to action. Calling the maid to sit upstairs, lest the child should cry, she put on her things and went out.

The Royal Arms was not far off: a handsome hotel, with a flight of steps, and a blazing gas-lamp at its entrance. She turned her face away from its light. It was striking ten as she ascended to the door. The landlord himself happened to be crossing the passage.

“Is a gentleman of the name of Freer stopping here?” inquired Mrs. Elliot.

“Freer? No, ma’am.”

“A friend of Mr. Turnbull’s in the Crescent,” she explained. “He came this afternoon and engaged a bedroom.”

“Oh, that gentleman—I did not know his name. Wears a bag-wig, ma’am?”

“The same.”

“He has not come in yet.”

But as they stood there, someone else came up the steps, and passed without notice: an old gentleman in a bag-wig. The landlord was pressing forward to mention the lady, but she touched his arm to detain him.

“Not here, in this public passage,” she whispered, shrinking into a corner. “I will follow to his bedroom. I am his daughter. There has been a difference between us, and we have not met for years. If you have children you can feel for me.”

The landlord looked at her compassionately, at her pale face and visible emotion. He stood before her till Mr. Freer had received his candle from the hands of the waiter, and had gone upstairs.

He was winding up his watch when Mrs. Elliot entered. She closed the door and stood before him. He turned round in surprise, but he did not recognise her in the dim light. Her agitation was great, she became hysterical, and fell forward at his feet.

“Oh, father! forgive, forgive me!” she sobbed out. Mr. Freer started from her, almost in affright.

“Louisa!—Elliot! you! What brings you here?” The Christian name had arisen involuntarily to his lips. He seemed to add the other by way of counteracting his familiarity.

“Sorrow brings me here—misery brings me. Father, I cannot live without your forgiveness. I think you must have cursed

me, and that the curse is still clinging to us, for nothing has prospered with me since I left your home."

"I have not cursed you," he said, still standing aloof from her.

"Will you accord me your forgiveness?" she continued to ask.

"Yes, if you can be satisfied with the letter and not the spirit."

She looked at him inquiringly, her lips parted, her thin white hands raised in supplication.

"If to say that I forgive you will avail, that forgiveness you may take," he said, answering her look. "But when you cast me off to become the wife of Thomas Elliot, you put a bar to all future intercourse between us."

"Your full and free forgiveness," she continued to implore.

"My free forgiveness," he repeated, "but not my friendship. You have your husband's."

“He has not been to me the husband I expected—hoped for,” she cried, saying more than she would have said but for the jealous, angry feeling that was rife within her, so especially on that night.

The lawyer smiled, a grim smile. “Few wives, when they marry as you did, do find their husbands what they expected.”

She looked earnestly at him. She had risen, and stood before him, her hands clasped still. “Oh, father, father, that I had never left your home!” she wailed. “At times I say to myself, ‘Let me cheat my memory, and persuade it that all these years have been a dream—that I shall awake and find myself little Louisa Freer!’”

“Ah,” returned the lawyer; “many a one would give their lives to awake from the same dream.”

“It is not visited on him as it is on me,” she added, her cheeks flushing. “Hour after

hour, while I am sitting alone, brooding over the past, striving to stave off present annoyances, he spends away from me, seeking only how he may amuse himself."

"Nothing else could be expected from a man of the disposition of Thomas Elliot but that he would seek his own amusement, married or single. I could have told you that years ago."

"I know you never liked him, papa; but will you not be reconciled to him?"

"Never!" vehemently uttered Lawyer Freer. "We will not speak upon the subject."

"I came here to urge another plea," she sadly added, after an interval of silence. "To ask you to help me; we are very poor."

"It is waste of time," was the stern reiteration of Lawyer Freer. "Thomas Elliot has no help from me, before my death or after it."

“It is not for him,” she eagerly rejoined, her eyes glistening with excitement. “Father, I declare to you that I ask for it but to thwart my husband, not to assist him. You have seen a child of mine at Mrs. Turnbull’s?”

“I have seen a child there,” he coldly answered. “I believe my daughter once mentioned that it was yours.”

My daughter! Well, she deserved it.

“It is my only boy: the rest were girls, and they have all died, save one. Father, I named him William, after you.”

“I had been better pleased that you had named him any other name to associate with that of Elliot,” was the disheartening answer.

“It is for him that I need assistance,” she resumed. “I want to place him at school. Oh, sir! if you knew all, perhaps you would aid me to do it.”

“What mistaken notion are you labouring

under?" returned Mr. Freer. "Help a child of Thomas Elliot's! Has he been sending you on this strange errand?"

"He does not know I am come. He was absent when I stole out of my home to ask this. It would be against his will if the boy were placed at school, for he wishes him to remain with Mrs. Turnbull. Do you remember, father, how Clara used to tyrannize over me at home—how she used to put upon me?"

"It may possibly have been the case. She was older than you."

"Sir, you knew she did, though you may not care to recall it. But she does still, and surely she is not justified. I have not a will of my own, especially as regards the boy; every wish I express she opposes, and Dr. Elliot upholds her. I could bear this," passionately went on Mrs. Elliot, disclosing what she would have shrunk from doing in a

calmer moment—"I could bear her encouraging the child in disobedience, but what I cannot bear is that she should draw my husband's affections away from me."

"I do not understand," replied Mr. Freer.

"Because you do not know Clara," said Mrs. Elliot. "She was as fond of Tom Elliot as I was, in those old days, but she had more worldly prudence. Who first encouraged him to our house?—she did. Who flirted with, and attracted him?—she did. And when the truth came out, that he loved me, she betrayed the tale to you in her jealous anger. Then came forward Squire Turnbull. I was a young, frightened child, and I did not dare to object to him; so, to escape, I rushed upon a worse course."

Lawyer Freer was knitting his brows. Parts of her speech had grated on his ear.

"She never forgave me from the morning she knew Tom Elliot cared for me and not

for her : she has never forgiven me yet. And now they have learnt to care for each other ; the time, the attentions, the love my husband owes me are given to her. Believe me or not, as you please, sir, it is the disgraceful truth."

"Disgraceful, degenerate girls, both of you," he exclaimed angrily, "to be led away by a man like him !"

"So I come to you for aid," she continued ; "and I have explained this, not to betray her folly, but to justify my application. If I could place the boy at school, we should no longer be under obligations to Mrs. Turnbull, neither would the child be an excuse for my husband's visits there. You cannot countenance such conduct in my sister."

"I have nothing to do with Mrs. Turnbull's conduct. She is old enough and wise enough to take care of herself, and I do not fear her doing so. And for you—should you

ever become a widow, then you may apply to me."

The tears were struggling down Mrs. Elliot's cheeks. She ventured to touch and take her father's hand. "For my peace and William's welfare I implore aid," she said; "not for Dr. Elliot."

Mr. Freer did not withdraw his hand, and he did not return her clasp; he suffered it to remain passively in hers. "You are asking what is not in my power to accord, Louisa," he at length said. "When you left my protection for Thomas Elliot's, I took an oath that he and his should remain strangers to me; that so long as he should live, they should never enjoy aught of mine. As well ask me to break this hand"—and he held it out—"as to break my oath."

"So there goes another of my life's delusions," she uttered, in a tone of anguish—"nearly the last. In my most sad moments

a ray of light has flashed across me—a vision of my being reconciled to my father; of his blessing me and my children, a blessing that might have been worked out in life. How could I have expected it? Father, farewell. God bless you and pity me!”

“Fare you well, Louisa.”

He took the candle and followed her to the door, intending to light her down the stairs, but the rays of a lamp hanging outside rendered it unnecessary. He stood there, and when she glanced back, from the end of the corridor, she saw him looking after her. Yearningly she strained her eyes to his, and her lips moved, and her steps halted. Perhaps she would have flown back to him—she had it in her heart to do so—to fall upon his neck, and, with kisses and sobs, implore a more loving forgiveness; but he turned in and closed the door, even as she looked, and she passed swiftly down the stairs, with a

bursting spirit. It was the last time they met on earth.

Nearly the last of her life's delusions, Mrs. Elliot had said. What else remained to her? Her children. William departed, as before, with Mr. and Mrs. Turnbull for Nearfordshire. With the latter's absence, Louisa again forgot her jealous troubles, and peace—rather cold perhaps, but undisturbed by storms—was resumed between herself and her husband. Upon her young child, the girl, every wish and hope seemed now centred. The love she lavished upon the infant was a matter of remark to all who had an opportunity of witnessing it: *they* loved their children, but not with an all-absorbing passion such as this. Did Mrs. Elliot ever hear that a check, sooner or later, always comes to love so inordinate? She would have known it, had she looked much into the world.

“Oh! when my darling can speak, when it can answer me with its dear little voice, I shall be too happy,” she was wont to say. “My father has abandoned me, my husband has forgotten his love for me, my noble boy gladdens other eyes than mine, but in this precious child shall lie my recompense. Make haste, my darling; make haste to speak!”

But the child seemed backward in speaking, and in walking also. Fifteen months old, and it attempted neither. Master Willy, at that age, had gone, with his sturdy legs, all over the room, and made himself heard when he wanted bread-and-butter. “Girls are not so forward as boys,” reasoned Mrs. Elliot.

It was a pretty child, and would have been more so but for an unusual look about the forehead, and a vacant stare in its blue eyes. Once or twice that vacant gaze had stricken a chill to the mother’s heart, bringing with

it a wild fear, a dread, which she drove back as some far-off horror, that would kill her if ever it came near.

One afternoon the servant, Harriet, had the baby lying on her knee. She had just come in from a walk, had taken off its things, and was now looking curiously at its face, and touching its head here and there. Dr. Elliot was stretched on the sofa, reading, as Harriet thought, but his eyes were raised over the book, watching her motions.

“Harriet, what are you looking at?”

The question was sudden, and startled the servant. She replied, in a confused, vague manner, that she was looking at “nothing particular.”

Dr. Elliot came forward, drew a chair in front of them, and sat down, gazing first at her, then at the child. “What *were* you thinking of, Harriet,” he persisted, “when you touched the child’s forehead?”

Harriet burst into tears. She was very fond of the infant. "I hope you will not ask me, sir," she rejoined; "I should be afraid to tell."

"Afraid of a fiddlestick," returned Dr. Elliot. "If you fancy there is anything the matter with her, speak, and it may be"—he seemed to hesitate for a word—"remedied. Many an infant has been ruined for life through its ailments not being known."

"It was not me, sir," began Harriet, looking round at the door, which was ajar, to make sure her mistress was not there, though, indeed, she could then hear her overhead in her own room. "It's true I have wondered at the child's being so dull, though I never thought much about it; but this afternoon, as I was sitting on a bench in the promenade walk, old Mrs. Chivers came up—she as goes out nursing."

"I know," said Dr. Elliot. "Well?"

“ She had her daughter’s child with her, a lively little thing of eleven months. It was stepping about, holding on by our knees, and laughing.

“ ‘ That’s what your little charge won’t do on a sudden,’ she begins to me.

“ ‘ Why not?’ says I. ‘ Little Miss Clara’s backward, but she’ll be all right when she gets her teeth.’

“ ‘ Why, she’s got her teeth,’ returns Nurse Chivers; ‘ hasn’t she?’

“ ‘ Only six,’ I said. ‘ Many a child’s more backward in walking than she.’

“ ‘ I don’t say she won’t walk in time,’ went on Dame Chivers, ‘ but you can’t have handled that baby for fifteen months, and not have found out what’s the matter with it. Folks are talking of it in the town, and saying——’ ” Harriet stopped.

“ Go on,” cried Dr. Elliot, with compressed lips.

“ ‘And saying,’ Nurse Chivers continued, ‘that the doctor must know it, if its poor mamma does not. Though the look of the baby might have told her that it is’—— I don’t like,” broke off Harriet, with renewed tears, “to repeat the cruel word she said—— though Nurse Chivers was grieved herself, and did not mean it unkindly. But if she’s right, the dear baby will never have wit nor sense through life to comfort us.”

Tighter, far tighter was the strain upon his lips, and a dark shade of pain marked his handsome face. He bent his head over his child. It lay wide awake, but perfectly passive in Harriet’s lap, its lips apart and its glistening eyes staring upwards.

“Oh, sir,” sobbed Harriet, “is it true?” And then she saw the expression on the doctor’s countenance, and knew that the news was no news to him. “Whoever will break it to my mistress?” she wailed.

“It must be suffered to come upon her by degrees,” was his answer. But had Dr. Elliot raised his eyes, he would have seen that it *had* come upon her, and not by degrees. She had come softly downstairs and inside the room, lest the baby slept, just in time to hear the dreadful sentence; and there she stood, transfixed and rigid, her eyes staring as wildly as the child’s. That far-off horror, seen but at a distance, had come near—into her very home. Some instinct caused Harriet to look round; she saw her mistress, and shrieked out. Dr. Elliot raised his head, bounded forward and caught her in his arms.

“Louisa! Good heavens! I did not know you were there. My dearest wife! do not distress yourself; all will be well; it is not so bad as these women think. Louisa! Louisa!”

No, no, the dreadful shock had come to

her, and nothing could soothe or soften it. When she recovered power of motion, she took the ill-fated child from the servant, laid its cheek against hers, and moaned as she swayed with it backwards and forwards. Suddenly she looked up at her husband—"If we could die—I and she—both of us!" she murmured, in a despairing, helpless sort of way, almost as if her own intellect were going.

It was indeed a fearful visitation, and it made itself heard in throbs of agony. Her brain was beating, her heart was working: care upon care, trouble upon trouble, had followed her wilful marriage, and now the last and greatest comfort, the only joy that seemed left to her, had turned into a thing to be dreaded worse than death. She had so passionately wished for this child, and now that it was given, what was it? Her husband sat regarding her in gloomy silence, pitying her—she could see that—pitying the ill-fated

child. Oh, if she could but undo her work and her disobedience ; if she could but go back years, and be once more careless, happy, dutiful Louisa Freer ! Not even Tom Elliot should tempt her away then.

How many, as her father said, have echoed the same useless prayer ! Ill-doing first, repentance afterwards ; but repentance can rarely, if ever, repair the ill-doing. All must bear the sorrows they bring upon themselves, even though they may end but with life ; but it seemed to Louisa Elliot, in that first hour of her full affliction, aye, and for years afterwards, that her punishment was worse than had ever yet fallen upon woman.





CHAPTER IV.

HALLIWELL HOUSE.

WE must return to Halliwell House — a distinct thing from The House of Halliwell. Halliwell House was the title which Hester and Lucy had chosen to bestow upon their new residence when they went into it, and we must see how they were getting on.

It cannot be said that they did not succeed; but they did not succeed sufficiently to pay their expenses, and their little capital was often drawn upon. Their number of pupils fluctuated much: one half-year they would have a tolerably good school, the next it

would be small. Many an anxious conversation did they have, many an hour of more anxious thought, many a sleepless night. To sink into debt and difficulty ; to spend the last shilling of their capital in striving to avert it ; to find their efforts fruitless, their money gone, and they turned from their present shelter, from their slender means of living, without any definite prospect of finding another—these were the fears and the visions that disturbed their rest continually. Oh, God ! pity and aid all who are struggling, as they were, to keep up appearances and earn a respectable living, and who find their means and their hopes grow less and less day by day !

“ I have a scheme running in my head,” Lucy said one evening : “ suppose we let lodgings ? ”

“ Let lodgings ! ” exclaimed Hester.

“ The drawing-room and one or two bed-

rooms. We can give up our own and go upstairs, and there's the one we fitted up for that parlour-boarder. Why not?"

"But it will not do to let lodgings in a ladies' school," returned Hester. "Such a thing was never heard of. All the parents would object to it."

"Most of them would never know it," said Lucy. "It cannot be any possible detriment to the pupils—can make no difference to them whatever. We might easily get thirty shillings a week for the three rooms, be at no outlay, and, if we had quiet people, it would be very little trouble."

"Thirty shillings a week!" repeated Hester. "It would go far towards the rent. I will sleep upon it, Lucy."

She did so. And the next day had some cards written in text-hand, intimating that two ladies wished to let a part of their house, and gave them to the stationers to display in

their shops, for of course they could not exhibit such an announcement in their own windows.

The cards were out three weeks, and not a soul applied. But one day, Sarah, the servant, went to the school-room, and beckoned to her mistress.

“It’s some folks after the rooms, ma’am,” she whispered. “They look likely people.” The girl was really as anxious as her mistresses.

Hester proceeded to the drawing-room, and two ladies rose at her entrance. Agreeable in person, and neatly dressed in mourning, the elder was about three or four-and-thirty, a rosy-cheeked woman, with quiet dark eyes; the younger, who was fairer and more delicate looking, was her sister.

“You have apartments to let, we hear,” said the elder, presenting her card, “and we are in search of some.”

Hester glanced at the card, and read "Mrs. Archer." "I beg your pardon," she said; "are you a widow?"

"No. My husband is abroad."

"Because we should decline to take a gentleman; it would hardly be suitable for a school. Only ladies."

"Well, he is abroad," the lady repeated; "it is only for ourselves. Can we see the rooms?"

"This is the sitting-room," said Hester, "and one bed-room opens from it. The other——"

"We only require one bed-room," interrupted Mrs. Archer, as she rose to inspect it.

The bargain was soon concluded. They engaged the two rooms at twenty-five shillings a week, and promised to take possession on the morrow.

"What extras will there be?" inquired the younger lady, Miss Graves.

“Extras!” repeated Hester, “not any. Excepting—I believe it is customary—some little gratuity to the servant.” She had not been in the habit of letting lodgings.

“What about the linen? are we to find it?” asked Lucy, when told of the success.

“The linen!” said Hester dubiously; “I forgot it completely. I never said a word about it.”

“Nor the ladies?”

“Nor the ladies. I remember they said they had their own spoons.”

“Then they take it for granted we find it, no doubt. Well, it will not much matter, either way. Did you ask for references, Hester?”

She really had not, and was obliged to confess it. Lucy laughed. Hester, who was generally so over-cautious!

The ladies went in, and for some weeks things went on with satisfaction; they paid

their rent regularly. Then they began to grow behindhand, and made excuses from time to time, which to Hester and Lucy sounded very plausible. But when the debt amounted to nearly £10, and still no money was coming forth, they grew uneasy. They had trusted to this to help them with the coming quarter's rent.

Hester was in the kitchen one morning, making apple-dumplings for dinner, when Sarah, who stood by, paring apples, began to talk.

"I think they are queer customers we have got hold of, ma'am," she said.

"What do you mean?" inquired her mistress.

"Well, for one thing, I fancy they have come to the end of their tether, and haven't neither cross nor coin to bless themselves with. They are living now upon a'most nothing. And where are their spoons gone to?"

“ Their spoons !”

“ The four table-spoons put on their table every day for dinner. It's a good month since the two first disappeared—that handsome silver cream-jug vanished about the same time—and now the two last is gone. When I was laying the cloth for dinner yesterday — them precious herrings they bought—I went on a-hunting for the spoons, and Miss Graves said, ‘ Oh, I have got them. I'll put them on the table myself presently, Sarah.’ But none came down to be washed.”

“ Sarah! where do you think they have gone to ?”

“ Well,” answered Sarah, who was worth her weight in gold for an honest, hard-working servant, though a free, rough-speaking one, “ I should say they have pawned them.”

“ Dear, dear !” lamented Hester, for she

did not affect to misunderstand her ; “ are they reduced to such straits as that ? ”

“ Law, ma’am ! let ’em hope they may never be reduced to no worse,” retorted Sarah. “ You don’t know the schemes and contrivances for getting along in London, when one’s hard up. It’s a mercy there’s such things to go to. Since the baker would not leave the bread on credit, our two ladies don’t take in enough to feed ’em. They have not had meat, neither, for three days, nor nothing to substitute for it but them six herrings yesterday ; which was anything but of the freshest. Miss Graves—it’s she as generally speaks—is always ready with excuses : they have colds, and can’t eat, or they’ve this, or that.”

“ Do they owe much to the baker ? ”

“ Five shillings, odd. He’s a cautious man, is our baker, and says he never trusts no lodgers. And now,” added Sarah, stopping

in her paring and looking at her mistress, "they don't take in any milk."

Hester went on, mixing her crust, and ruminating. She felt much sorrow for them, for she was sure they were not systematic deceivers; and she felt for herself. She looked upon the money as lost, and she wanted it badly.

"I should like to know what they mean to do for coals," resumed Sarah; "there ain't above a couple of scuttlefuls left. They'll be wanting us to lend 'em some; but if we do, we may whistle for 'em back again. Haven't I pared enough yet, ma'am?"

Hester had been paying no attention to the apples, and Sarah had done too many. So, to prevent waste, she determined to make a pie, and so use them up. Popping her dumplings, when they were ready, into the iron pot, she took down the flour-jar again.

Besides this, she had to slice and salt some

red cabbage for pickling, so that it struck one o'clock before she had well finished. She told Sarah to take up the dinner.

It happened to be Irish stew that day, and Sarah reached the large hash-dish and put it on the table, and then, taking the saucepan from the fire, she turned the greater portion of its contents into the dish. Hester went into the pantry to put away some of the things she had been using, and just then Miss Graves entered the kitchen, nearly running against Sarah and her hash-dish, which she was carrying out.

Miss Graves went towards the fire, not seeing Hester. And oh! the pinching look of care and want that her face wore! It grieved Hester to the heart to see it, and she wondered she had never noticed it before. She looked with eager eyes into the saucepan, which Sarah had lodged, without its lid, on the fender, and then turned away, as if she

would shut out its sight. On the table there lay a little heap of stew, splashed by Sarah when pouring it out, and she stole to the table, and caught this up greedily with her finger, and ate it. Hester heard Sarah coming back again, and had to come out of her hiding-place—not, indeed, that she had gone in to hide. Miss Graves started when she saw her, and her face flushed. Hester pretended not to have seen her until then.

“Is it you?” she said. “What a cold day! Pray take care of your sleeve against the table: something seems to have been spilt on it. I hope it has not touched it.”

“Oh no,” said Miss Graves, brushing away at her right-hand cuff with a nervous movement.

“Some of them young misses jumped about when they saw and smelt the Irish stew,” observed Sarah, when she entered. “It’s a rare favourite dish of theirs.”

“ I don’t wonder at that, when it smells as savoury as yours,” remarked Miss Graves.

“ I looked a little to it myself to-day, and put in a bit of thyme : it’s a great improvement,” said Hester. “ Don’t you think so ?”

“ I don’t know,” she answered. “ I don’t think we ever put thyme in ours.”

“ Then, if you’ll allow me, I’ll send you up a small plate of this to taste,” said Hester. “ For,” she remarked to Lucy afterwards, “ I could not bear to think that we were going to eat all we needed and that they should only long for it.”

“ Oh, thank you,” Miss Graves stammered, her face flushing again ; “ but—the trouble——”

“ Pray don’t mention it,” interrupted Hester ; “ it is no trouble. Sarah, bring in that little dish.”

She took her place at the head of the school-room table, and Sarah, looking as

demure as if she understood nothing, took in the dish. Hester heaped it up.

But of course they could not do that every day, and circumstances grew more and more straitened with their lodgers. Sarah was fond of opening her budget of wonders, as to what they did, but Hester paid little heed to her. One evening, a day or two after the school had broken up for the Christmas holidays, she came bounding into the room, with eager, wild words. Hester and Lucy were sitting by fire-light, for it was the dusk hour before tea, and she startled them both, though she spoke in a whisper.

“Ma’am! Miss Lucy! as sure as you are both alive, them two have a man upstairs!”

“Who is he? What is he come for? Money, I suppose.”

“Not that sort of a man,” retorted Sarah, an indefinite amount of contempt in her tone for her mistress’s simplicity—“not folks as

call. A man locked up with 'em ; concealed in their bedroom."

"How can you assert such a thing, Sarah?" exclaimed Lucy sharply. "If they heard you, they might have you up before a police-court."

"Shouldn't care if they did," returned the woman. "I'd stand up for the truth there as well as here. If ever I heard a man talk, I heard one up in their room just now."

"Then you did not *see* him?" observed Lucy sarcastically.

"Nor didn't want to, Miss Lucy, if you mean for convincing my eyes. I'll tell you, ma'am, how it was," she added, turning to her mistress—as Hester was always called. "Their candles be all out—the last pound have lasted 'em three weeks, if it have lasted one, so it's plain they have mostly sat in the dark. In getting the candlesticks out, just now, I remembered there was nothing to put

in 'em, so up I went into the drawing-room to say so. The door was locked when I got there—and they have kept it so for the last few days, which is another odd thing, and took to making their own bed, which is odder still. I wasn't in a sunny humour—locking up rooms like that, indeed!—and I gave the latch a twist and a sharp push, and open it flew. In I went : there wasn't a bit of fire in the grate, but they have it now in their bedroom instead—I should like to know why. It was next to pitch dark, save a glimmer of light that came through the bedroom door, which was on the jar, and as I stood there a strange voice, a man's voice, called out, 'I am so thirsty ! If there's nothing else, you must give me water. My lips and tongue are parched.' ”

“ Sarah, how can you be so foolish ? ” uttered Lucy. “ Mrs. Archer speaks gruffly.”

“ A man's voice it was. I'll take my Bible oath on it,” persisted Sarah. “ I ran against

the table then, and caused a noise—not for the purpose: I was stepping softly forrard to peep in, and came in contract with one of its legs. Out flew Miss Graves, just as if I'd been a robber, and banged-to the door behind her.

“ ‘Who's there?’ she called out: for now the door was shut we couldn't see the ghost of one another.

“ ‘It's only me, miss,' I answered. ‘There ain't no candles left.’

“ ‘Oh—well—I—I'll see about it,' she said. ‘We don't want them yet; we are sitting by fire-light. How did you get in, Sarah? I thought I slipped the bolt; for when we are sitting by ourselves up here, and you all downstairs, we feel timid.’

“ ‘You couldn't have slipped it very far, miss,' I said; ‘I gave the door a smart push, and it opened. Of course I shouldn't have done it if I had known you'd fastened me out;

but this is an awk'ard latch, and used to have a trick of catching, and I thought no more but what it was at it again.' So, with that, ma'am, I came away downstairs, and she came across the room and bolted the door again."

"Your ears heard double," cried Lucy. "You do fancy strange things sometimes, Sarah. Recollect the evening you came in to us last summer and protested Miss Brown was talking out of the front window. And she fast asleep in her bed all the time at the back of the house."

"That Miss Brown had as many ruses as a fox," uttered Sarah, "and I shall never believe but what she was talking out at the front winder; and to somebody over the wall, too! However, she's gone, so it don't matter; but, whether or no, I ain't mistaken now, and I'll lay my life there is a man up there."

Lucy raised the fire into a blaze, which lighted up the amused, incredulous smile on her face. But Hester was staggered. The girl was so very earnest, and she knew she had her share of strong common-sense.

“It was a gentleman’s voice,” she resumed, “and he spoke as if he was tired, or else in pain. Suppose I go and borrow the next door ladder, and climb up to their winder, and have a look in?”

“Yes,” cried Lucy, laughing heartily as she put down the poker, “do, Sarah. Never mind falls.”

“What can I say we want with it? They’ll think night’s a queer time to borrow a garden ladder. Suppose I go with a tale that an obstinate fit has took our curtains, and they won’t draw, and I want to get up to the rings? It is——”

“Do not run on so, Sarah,” interrupted her mistress; “you know I should permit nothing

of the sort. And if the blind is down, as it is almost sure to be, you could not see into the room if you did get up to the window."

"I'll go and see," was Sarah's answer, as she darted into the hall and thence to the garden.

"It is down," she said, returning again. "But just come and look here, Miss Lucy. If there isn't the shadow of a man's hat on the blind, I never saw a hat yet."

They went out into the cold night, and Hester followed them. There really was the outline of a man's hat thrown upon the blind. It seemed as if the little bamboo table had been drawn from the corner of the room—to get at the cupboard, probably—and was placed in front of the window. On it stood the hat, and the opposite fire-light threw its shadow on the blind. As they looked, the form of one of the ladies passed before the window and lifted the table back to its place,

out of sight, and Hester and Lucy went shivering into the house again.

“Now, ma’am, what do you think?” asked Sarah triumphantly.

“Why, I think that someone has called,” resolutely replied Hester. “The ladies are most respectable in their conduct; perfectly so: it is impossible to think otherwise. You may have been out of the way when he— whoever it is—came to the door, and one of them must have come down and let him in. As to his being in the bedroom, it is natural they should be where the fire is, this cold night.”

“Not a soul has been to the door this afternoon,” persisted Sarah. “I have been ironing, and have never stirred out of the kitchen. But now, ma’am, to prove the thing, I’ll just turn the key of the front door, and put it in my pocket. If it is a visitor, he must ask to be let out; if it’s not——”

Sarah said no more. For who should have entered, after a tap at the door, but Miss Graves. She held a tea-cup in her hand.

"I am very sorry to trouble you, Miss Halliwell," she said hesitatingly—she was a bad beggar—"but would you oblige us with a little tea to-night? We are out of it, and it is late to go and purchase any."

"Certainly," answered Hester pleasantly, rising to unlock the old sideboard drawer, where she kept her tea-caddy. "Nothing is so refreshing as a cup of tea."

"We don't in general care for it," observed Miss Graves, "but my sister is very poorly to-night, and complains of thirst. Thank you greatly," she added, taking the cup from Hester.

"Don't you want water for it, ma'am?" called out Sarah. "Our kettle is on the boil."

"Yes, if you please," she answered. "I will come into the kitchen and make it now."

She did so, having a contest with Sarah afterwards. The latter wanted to carry up the tray with the cups and saucers, but Miss Graves insisted on doing it herself.

“To keep me out of the room,” muttered Sarah when she was gone. “For fear I should see what I should see.”

However, in about half-an-hour the bell rang, and up bounded Sarah. It was to take away the tray ; and when she had put it in the kitchen she went into the parlour again, where Hester and Lucy were now at their tea.

“Well, what did you see?” inquired Lucy.

“Nothing, ma’am ; and didn’t expect to,” was Sarah’s sulky reply. “They took care of that before they called me up.”

“Did you go into the bedroom?”

“Yes. Miss Graves was sitting at the table, as if she’d been making tea ; and Mrs.

Archer was by the fire, looking well enough, as far as I saw by fire-light. They had stirred the blaze up just as I went in, as an excuse for having no candles."

"And what about the gentleman?" laughed Lucy.

"I expect he was in the bed, or on it, for the curtains was all drawn close round it as tight as wax, like I have never seen 'em before. I'm sure, ma'am, this affair's as good as a play."

"Not to me," sighed Hester, "if there should be anything in it."

"And the hat?" continued Lucy.

"Well, I was stupid there. I was so struck with them curtains—picturing what was inside 'em, and peering if there wasn't a slit as big as a needle to look through, that I never thought of the hat or the table. But don't you flatter yourself it was there, Miss Lucy; they'd take precious good care to put

it away afore they rang for me. I've a notion the man must be ill."

"Why so?"

"Because I heard him say he was parched, as I told you, ma'am. And then, their having the tea! That wasn't for Mrs. Archer; there's no more the matter with her than there is with me. Besides, who's the toast-and-water for? They told me to make a quart-jug full, and Miss Graves said she'd come down and fetch it."

They heard no more that night of the strange visitor. If he was there, he remained, for Sarah carried out her threat, and put the key of the front door in her pocket. The next morning Hester went into the kitchen to give orders.

"Look here, ma'am," cried Sarah, exhibiting some meat upon a plate. "Miss Graves has been out and brought in this bit of scrag of mutton and them two turnips, and she said

she supposed you'd obleege 'em with a bit of parsley out of the garden. It's to make some broth for her sister, she said, and they'll stew it upstairs ; and I'm to take it up with the saucepan of water. Not more than sixpence she couldn't have gave for it," concluded Sarah, taking up the meat with an action of contempt, and flopping it down on the plate again.

" Sarah, you are unfeeling," exclaimed her mistress reprovingly. " The poor ladies are much to be pitied."

" Pitied, indeed ! What business have they in a house like ours, with no money to carry 'em on in it ?" retorted Sarah, who was in one of her worst humours. " And the man they have up there—perhaps he is to be pitied, too !"

" I must forbid further allusion to that absurdity, Sarah. There is no man up there ; the very idea is preposterous."

“Very well, ma’am. If anything bad turns up out of this, don’t say I did not give warning of it. One on ’em slept on the sofa in the drawing-room last night, for I see the bed-clothes there this morning. I think that proves something.”

The girl tossed her head, and went out of the kitchen. Hester felt uneasy all that day ; but nothing fresh arose. Night came, and Lucy, who had a bad cold (caught through flying out the previous night to stare at their window), went to bed at nine o’clock. At ten Hester sent Sarah, sitting up herself to finish a little sewing that she had in hand. After that she sat warming her feet, and it was upon the stroke of eleven when she rose to go to bed.



CHAPTER V.

AFTER MANY YEARS.

HESTER had the candle in one hand, and her work in the other, and was going softly up the stairs, when the drawing-room door was flung violently open, and out dashed Mrs. Archer, nearly knocking Hester and her load down together.

“Oh! Miss Halliwell, where’s Sarah?” she exclaimed, in nervous excitement. “In mercy let her run for a doctor.”

“What is the matter?” asked Hester. “Who is ill?”

“Oh, come and see! It is of no use

attempting concealment now." And seizing Hester's arm, she hurried her through the drawing-room. Miss Graves was getting up from the sofa, where she had retired to rest, and Hester put down her work, and went, with her candle, into the bedroom. On the bed, his head raised high upon a pillow, lay a gentleman, his eyes closed and his face still and white, whilst drops of blood were slowly issuing from his mouth.

"Is he dead?" uttered Hester, in the first shock of surprise.

"Where's Sarah? where's Sarah?" was all the answer of Mrs. Archer. "We *must* have a doctor."

"Sarah is in bed. I will go up and call her."

"In bed! then I'll go for one myself." And, throwing on a shawl and bonnet, Mrs. Archer darted down the stairs, but stopped ere she reached the bottom, and looked up

at Hester, who was lighting her. "The nearest surgeon—where?"

"About ten doors higher up the road. You'll see the lamp over the door."

"Ah, yes, I forgot;" and she flew on. Hester followed, for she remembered that the key of the gate was hanging up in the kitchen, and Mrs. Archer could not get out without it. Then she called up Sarah, and went back to the room.

"Who is this gentleman?" she whispered to Miss Graves.

"Mr. Archer, my sister's husband," was the reply; and, just then, the invalid opened his eyes and looked at them.

Never will Hester forget that moment. The expression of those eyes flashed on the chords of her memory like a ray of light, and gradually she recognised the features, though they were altered, worn, and wasted. Archer? Archer? Yes, although the name

had never struck her before as in connection with *him*, there could be no doubt about it. She was gazing on him who had been so dear to her in early life—too dear, for the ending that came.

“He is a clergyman — the Reverend George Archer?” she whispered to Miss Graves.

“Yes. How did you know?”

Poor Hester did not answer. Those old days were coming back to her, as in a dream. The happy home at Seaford, their engagement, the few weeks of transient bliss that followed, the bright vision of the Lady Georgina, and then the wretched parting. And now thus to meet him! Lying on a bed in her own house, and not long for this world!

His wife returned with the doctor. He said the case was not so serious as it appeared; that the blood came from a small

vessel ruptured on the chest, not the lungs. Hester remained with Mrs. Archer that night. Sarah made a fire in the drawing-room, and they sat by it while he dozed. Mrs. Archer spoke of her troubles, and sobbed bitterly.

“Has he been long here?” inquired Hester, wondering how in the world he had got in.

“It was the day your pupils were going away,” replied Mrs. Archer. “I was standing at the window, watching the carriage which had come to fetch some of them, when I saw my husband coming down the road, evidently looking out for the house. He appeared ill and thin, walked as if his strength were gone—but I knew him, and flew down to the gate, which was open as well as the house-door. As it happened, no one was in the hall when we came upstairs; I heard Sarah’s voice on the upper

flight ; she was bringing down luggage, but she did not see us."

"But you ought to have told me," urged Hester.

"I know that," she rejoined ; "and such a thing as taking him in, clandestinely, never entered my thoughts. It arose with circumstances. Look at our position : you positively refused to receive a gentleman here ; but he had come, and how were we to remove to other lodgings, owing you what we do, destitute of means, almost destitute of food ? So there he lay, ill, on that bed. Reproach me as much as you will, Miss Halliwell ; turn us into the road, if you must do so : it seems that little can add to my trouble and perplexity now. There have been moments lately when I have not known how to refrain from—from—running away—and——"

"And what ?" asked Hester.

“Why, I had thought the calm bed of a river would be to me as rest after toil.”

“Goodness me, Mrs. Archer!” uttered Hester, half in surprise, half in a shock of indignation; “a Christian must never use such language as that, while there’s a Heaven to supplicate for refuge. All who ask for strength *to bear*, find it there.”

“I have had no happiness in my married life,” she went on to say. “It is—let me see—six years since, now. Mr. Archer was a working curate in London: a weary life he led of it in that large parish of poor people. Soon after we married his health began to fail; he used to seem dispirited, and the duties were too heavy for him. I took it into my head that some sorrow was upon him; that he had never really loved me. I don’t know. Once I taxed him with it, with both, but he seemed surprised, said he thought he had been always kind, as indeed he had,

and I let the idea drop. His health grew worse, change of scene and air were essential to him, and he received an appointment as foreign chaplain—army chaplain I think it was—and went out with that Spanish Legion. Later, I and my sister lost our money. My brother, with whom it was placed, failed, and we were deprived of our income. Latterly we have been living by—it is of no use to mince the matter—by pledging things; and now my husband has come home without his pay, and cannot get the arrears which are due to him. He says they have all been put off, officers and soldiers—not one of them has received a farthing. The Spanish Government ought to be prosecuted.”

There was a pretty state of things! That sick clergyman in the house, and all three of them without means. Lucy was up in arms when told the news.

“They must go out of the house; they

must, Hester ; even if we pay for lodgings for them. If he dies, and has to be buried from here, it will be the ruin of the school. Dear, dear !—to think of its being George Archer ! How things do come about in this world !”

Mrs. Archer wrote to her brother, doubting, however, his ability to assist them, but at the end of a week there came a ten-pound note. Mr. Archer was better then.

“ Now I will not take any of it,” Hester said to Mrs. Archer. “ You shall keep it to start afresh with in new lodgings, but you must leave these.”

That same afternoon, Mrs. Archer and her sister went out to seek some, and Hester, according to their request, took her work and went to sit with Mr. Archer.

He was sitting up in the easy-chair, the one which had been Mrs. Halliwell's, and the Major's before her. Many a time had she sat in it when talking to George Archer in

the old days. A queerish sort of feeling came over Hester as she took her place opposite to him, for it was the first time they had been alone together ; but she made herself busy with her sewing.

They conversed on indifferent subjects—the weather, his medicine, and so on ; when all at once he wheeled that chair closer to Hester's, and spoke in low, deep tones :

“ Hester, have you ever forgiven me ? ”

“ Indeed, yes ; long ago. ”

“ Then it is more than I have done by myself,” he groaned. “ But I was rightly served. ”

Hester looked up at him, and then down at her work again.

“ You heard, perhaps, how she jilted me. Hester, as truly as that you are sitting there, working, she drew me on—drew me on from the first, to flirt with and admire her ! ”

“ You are speaking of —— ” Hester could not bring out the word.

“ *Her.* Lady Georgina. Who else ? And when she saw, as I know she did see, to what a passionate height my love was reaching, she fooled me more and more. I did not see my folly at the time ; I was too infatuated to do so ; but I have cursed it ever since, as I dare say you have.”

“ Hush ! hush ! ” interrupted Hester.

“ And when it was betrayed to the Earl, and he drove me away, to part with me as she did, without a sigh, without a regret ! ” he went on, not deigning to notice the interruption. “ Hester, you were *well* avenged.”

“ Do not excite yourself, Mr. Archer.”

“ How I got over those first few weeks I don't know, and shudder to remember. Then came her marriage : I read it in the papers. Heartless, wicked girl ! And she had solemnly protested to me she did not care for Mr.

Caudour. Well! troubles and mad grief do come to an end; and so, thank God! does life."

"What was your career afterwards?"

"My career for a time was perfect idleness. I could do nothing. Remorse for my wild infatuation had taken heavy hold upon me, and a great amount of misery was mixed up with it. Then, when I came to myself a little, I sought employment, and obtained the curacy of a parish in London, where the pay was little and the work incessant. Next, I married: not with the feeling I should have married *you*, Hester, even then; but the lady had money, a good income, and I had need of many luxuries—for my health was failing—or necessities, call them what you will, which my stipend would not obtain. I grew worse. I think, if I had remained in London, I should have died there, and I went out to Spain."

“From whence you have now returned?”

“Yes ; penniless—done out of the money coming to me. And now the sooner I die the better, for I am only a burden to others. I am closing a life rendered useless by my own infatuated folly : my talents have been buried in a napkin, my heart turned to gall and wormwood. Oh, Hester ! again I say it, you are richly avenged.”

“Have you ever met since?”

“Georgina Seaford ? Never. Her husband is Lord Caudour now. I saw the old Baron’s death in a stray newspaper that came out to Spain.”

“I have always felt thankful for one thing,” said Hester : “that she did not know of our engagement. And perhaps that may offer some slight excuse for her conduct.”

“She did know of it,” said Mr. Archer quickly.

Hester looked up, pained and surprised,

but still in doubt. "How could she have known of it?" she breathed.

"From me. Oh, yes, I was infatuated all through the piece, and I told her that. I also told her when it was broken off. Don't execrate me, Hester. I have done nothing but execrate myself ever since. Excuse for her conduct there was none : she was a vain, heartless girl."

Hester fell into a reverie, from which she was awakened by hearing the garden gate open, and she looked from the window. "Here come your wife and Miss Graves," she said. "How soon they are in again!"

"Hester," he murmured, in an impassioned tone, seizing her hand as she was about to pass him, intending to open the drawing-room door to welcome them, for in all the little courtesies of life Hester, like her mother, was prompt, "say you forgive me."

She leaned down, and spoke soothingly.

“George, believe me, I have perfectly forgiven you: I forgave you long ago. That the trial to me was one of length and bitterness it would be affectation to deny, but I have outlived it. Let me go. They are coming up the stairs.”

He pressed her hand between both of his, and then kissed it as fervently as he had kissed her own lips that night, years, years before, when they were walking home, after church, behind her mother and Lucy. She drew it hastily from him, for they were already in the drawing-room, and a feeling, long buried, very like that forgotten *love*, cast a momentary sunshine on her heart: and then she laughed at herself for being a great simpleton.

They had found lodgings, and they all moved into them the following day. Hester could not but feel relieved when they had left the house.

It happened the following spring, it was in May, Hester had business at the house of one of their pupils, whose father lived in Upper Brook Street. When close to it she found herself in the midst of a string of carriages, inside which were ladies in full evening dress, though it was only one o'clock in the day. Full of surprise, she asked a policeman what it meant.

“The Queen’s Drawing-room.”

To be sure. She wondered, then, she had not thought of it for herself. It happened to be the first time she had ever seen the sight, and she stood gazing at the rich dresses, the snow-white feathers, and the lovely, lovely faces. The carriages had been stationary, but now there was a move, and then they were stationary again. More beautiful than any gone before was the inmate of the chariot now opposite to Hester—a fair, elegant woman, with a bright

smile and haughty eye. Surely she knew the features ! She did, alas for her ! Though she had never seen them since they stepped, with their sinful fascinations, between her and her betrothed husband, Hester felt sure that they were those of Georgina Seaford.

“Do you know who this lady is ?” she whispered to her friend the policeman.

He looked at the lady, at the coronet on the carriage, at the white coats and crimson velvet breeches of the servants. “I think,” he answered, “it is the Lady Caudour.”

Time had passed lightly over her : her countenance was as smooth, as smiling, as free from care as it had been in her girlhood. Hester was struggling through life with a lonely heart, and *he* was dying in his obscure lodgings, after a short career of regret and sorrow ; whilst she who had caused all, who had sacrificed them both to her selfish vanity,

seemed to be revelling in all the good that could make existence happy.

In her deep and bitter thoughts, Hester had unconsciously fixed her gaze too long and earnestly on that lovely face. It attracted the attention of Lady Caudour, and she returned it. A recollection seemed to flash across her, and she leaned towards Hester and spoke. The chariot was close to the pavement, the policeman had moved on, and not a single spectator had halted just at that spot.

“I think I have some remembrance of your countenance,” she said, in a distant, aristocratic, but essentially civil tone. “You are—or were—Miss Halliwell.”

The colour flashed over Hester’s face; she was “taken back,” as the saying runs. She bowed in reply.

“You used to come to the castle at Seaford to teach my sister, Lady Ellen.”

"I hope Lady Ellen is well," stammered Hester, feeling as awkward as she did the first day she ever went there, and not knowing what to say.

"Quite well. She will soon be no longer Lady Ellen Seaford; she marries the Earl of Thetford at the close of the season. Are you Miss Halliwell still, may I ask?"

"Still Miss Halliwell."

The carriage moved on a step, and Hester, in her sense of politeness, moved on with it.

"Are you still at Seaford? Who is the rector there now?"

"Not Mr. Archer," returned Hester, wondering what courage prompted her to say it. "But we are no longer living at Seaford."

"Mr. Archer"—in the most perfectly indifferent tone—"I did not know he was ever appointed there."

"I said he was not, madam," was Hester's

rejoinder. "He marred his own prospects in early life—or they were marred for him—and he is now dying. Dying, my Lady Caudour, in want and obscurity."

"How very sad!" was Lady Caudour's reply, delivered with highbred indifference. "I am sorry for him. Is Mrs. Halliwell still living?"

Before Hester could reply the carriage advanced again, and the Lady Caudour bowed her stately head by way of farewell, not waiting for the answer. Hester looked after her—at the bedizened servants, the luxurious carriage, the magnificent dress and jewels of its mistress, at her careless ease, her conscious vanity as of old, at all the signs of wealth and luxury, of the pomp and pride of life. Her heart was very sad just then. "Oh, Father! Father!" she wailed forth in the anguish of the retrospect pressing sharply upon her: "Thy blessings appear to

be dealt out with an unequal hand. Nevertheless, may we be enabled ever to say, Thy will be done ; for Thy ways are not as our ways, and Thou knowest what is best for us !”

The Archers did not get on very well. Hester often sent them a substantial plate of something, under pretence of tempting his appetite ; slices of roast beef, or a tureen of nourishing broth with the meat in. Lucy would say they could not afford it, and Sarah exclaimed loudly against “ cooking for other people ;” but they were fellow-creatures, and in need, *and he was George Archer !* That summer put an end to his weary life.





CHAPTER VI.

THE SCHOOL AND THE HANDKERCHIEFS.

JUST about this time a piece of good fortune befell Mrs. Goring. Her godmother, from whom she had never had the slightest expectations, died, and left her an annuity of £300 for her life. It was, however, to cease then. Dr. Goring was getting on famously, was much liked in Middlebury, and Mary was very happy.

Hester had used to say that no one need envy her, or any other schoolmistress.

What with the wearing labour of instructing so many hours daily, the din of the school-room, the crosses and vexations sure to arise with the pupils or their parents, and the worry sometimes caused by the teachers, it was anything but an easy life. A troublesome event arose with one of their teachers, a Miss Powis. But, with the reader's permission, it may be as well to give the account of it in Hester's own words. I am sure she can relate it a great deal better than I can. Therefore, for the next few pages, please to note that it is Miss Halliwell speaking: not the author.

Miss Powis was recommended to us as being particularly likely to suit. A younger sister of hers was at our school as day scholar, the parents living near in a small cottage. They had moved in a very respectable sphere of life, but had been unfortunate,

and the father had obtained some employment in the City, to and from which he walked morning and evening. Miss Powis was about two-and-twenty, an accomplished, handsome girl, but somewhat wild and random, leading the pupils into mischief, instead of keeping them out of it. Though I cannot but say I liked her, for she had a kind heart, and was ever ready to do a good turn for anyone.

The second half year she was with us, soon after the reassembling of the pupils subsequently to the midsummer vacation, the fair took place as usual. It was a great nuisance, this fair, every summer, the noise of the drums and fifes of the show-people reaching even into our school-room, to our annoyance and the school's delight, obliging us to sit with the windows closed. No good was ever done whilst that fair lasted ; lessons were not learnt, and copies were blotted ; the

children's attention being all given to those sounds in the fields at the back.

Well, it was one evening at fair time : Lucy had gone to bed with a sick headache, and a lady unexpectedly dropped in to tea, having come down by one of the City omnibuses. Of course I could not go out and leave her, so I was obliged to send Miss Powis alone with the children for their evening walk. "Go up the Plover Road, opposite," I said to her, when they were ready, "as far as Ringfence Field, which will be a quiet, pleasant, rural walk ; but be sure not to go within sight or hearing of that disreputable fair."

"Oh, no," she replied, "not for the world;" and away they filed out at the gate.

Now what did that Miss Powis do? As soon as they were beyond view of the house, she turned round—for she was walking first, in her place, mine and Lucy's being at the

rear—and said, coming to a standstill :
“ Girls, suppose we go down Dogfight Lane”
(a narrow place, leading to the fair : dirty cottages on one side, trees and a ditch on the other) “ just a little way, and have a peep, from the distance, at the pictures outside the shows ? Can you all undertake to keep the secret, indoors ? I’m sure there’s no harm looking at shows half a mile off : and in that Plover Road we shan’t see a soul but the old cow in Ringfence Field, and our own shadows.” Of course the schoolgirls would not have been schoolgirls had they said “ No ” to any mischief where a teacher led, and they went half frantic with delight, vowing, one and all, that the tortures of the Inquisition should not wring the secret from them—the said tortures having been the subject of their morning’s theme.

Half way down Dogfight Lane they came in view of the still-distant shows, and could

have halted there and admired the painted scenes. But this did not satisfy them—one bite out of an apple rarely does anyone—and on they went, down the lane, and burst right into the confusion of the fair. They visited the selling-stalls first, where some bought gingerbread ; some unripe plums and rotten cherries ; some—how humiliated I felt when I heard of it!—raffled for cakes, and shot at pincushions ; some drank bottles of trash and fizz, called ginger-beer ; and some bought fortune-telling cards ; indeed, it is impossible to say what they did not buy. Then they went round to the shows to gaze at the pictures. Ugly booths decorated with play-acting scenery ; dandy men in tight-fitting white garments, with red-paint eyebrows ; harlequins turning summersaults, and laughing at their own coarse jokes ; young women, in a meretricious costume of glazed calico and spangles, reaching no lower

than their knees, who walked about with their arms a-kimbo, and waltzed with the harlequins! That a ladies' boarding-school should have been seen in front of anything so low-lived and demoralizing!

It was seven o'clock, and the performances were about to commence, drums were beating, fifes were piping, the companies were dancing, and the cries "Walk-up, ladies and gentlemen, we are just going to begin," were echoing above the din. The young ladies stood looking on at all this, longing to see further; for if the outside was so attractive, what must the inside be? And—well, I must not reflect too harshly upon them: it is hard, especially for the young and light-hearted, to resist temptation. They went in—they really did: some into the "waxwork," and the rest into this theatre affair where the harlequins were. When they came to club their money together, it

was found to be deficient, but the showmen took them for what they could muster. Very considerate of them ! All particulars came out to me afterwards—or how could I have related this ?—and I was ready to go out of my mind with vexation. But it was not their fault, it was Miss Powis's ; and I have scarcely, I fear, excused her in my heart for her imprudence that night. But I do believe there is no act of deliberate disobedience but brings its own punishment, sooner or later. I have remarked it many times in the course of my life ; and this did, with her.

Meanwhile, when my visitor departed, and I had been upstairs to see if Lucy wanted anything, I sat on at the parlour window, beginning to think the young ladies late, but concluding that the beauty of the summer's night made them linger, when Sarah came in, and said Mrs. Nash wanted me.

Mrs. Nash was the lodger now. A lady had taken the apartments after the departure of the Archers, and had remained five months with us, and now Mrs. Nash had succeeded her. She was a very grand lady in purse and dress. Her husband had made a mint of money at something in London, a retail shop we heard, but lately he had given it up, and bought mines, and they had recently taken a villa in our neighbourhood. Mr. Nash was in Cornwall, and his wife had engaged our drawing-room and bedroom for a month, that she might be on the spot to superintend the fitting-up of her new house. She was certainly very far removed from a gentlewoman, and spoke very ungrammatically. So I went upstairs when Sarah said Mrs. Nash wanted to see me.

“Have the goodness to shut the door behind you,” she said, when I entered,

without rising from her own seat, which I thought not very polite. She always spoke as if we were her inferiors, though, in birth and education—but that has nothing to do with the matter just now.

“I thought you might have liked the door open this warm evening,” I civilly answered, turning back to close it.

“So I might, for it’s close enough in this room,” she rejoined; “but I’ve something to say that I don’t want all the world to hear. Won’t you sit down?”

I drew a chair forward, and sat down near her, waiting for her to continue.

“That servant of yours,” she abruptly began—“I want to ask a few questions about her. Is she honest?”

“Honest? Sarah?” For I was too much surprised to say more.

“The question’s plain enough,” repeated Mrs. Nash, in an impatient tone. “Have

you never had no cause to doubt her honesty?"

"She is as honest as the day," I replied warmly. "She has been with us two years, and is above suspicion. I could trust the girl with untold gold."

"It's very odd," continued Mrs. Nash. "It was this day week — this is Friday, isn't it?—I came in from the villa, tired to death; for I had been standing over them painters and paperers, and telling 'em a bit of my mind about their laziness. I was as hungry as a hunter, besides, and after I had took off my things, I went down to the kitchen to see if Sarah was getting forward with my dinner. She had the steak on the fire, and I went up and looked at the potatoes, for fear she should be doing 'em too much, for young ones is good for nothing when they are soft. That I had my pocket-handkerchief in my hand

then I'll swear to, for I lifted the lid of the saucepan with it, and Sarah saw me, but when I got back to the drawing-room here, it was gone."

"You may have put it on the kitchen table and forgotten it," I replied.

"That's just my own opinion, that I did leave it there. I came straight upstairs, and as I was coming in at this door, I put my hand in my pocket for my handkerchief, for the current of air had made me sneeze; but no handkerchief was there. That teacher of yours was standing here, waiting for me: you had sent her up with a book. But she couldn't have touched it."

"Miss Powis? Oh dear no."

"Don't I say she couldn't? She was at the end there, by the window, and I missed my handkerchief coming in at the door. I took the book from her, and she went down, and I after her."

“ Did you go back to the kitchen? Did you ask Sarah?” I inquired.

“ I went back at once, I tell you, following on Miss Powis’s steps, and of course I asked Sarah ; and what first raised my suspicions against her was her saying she saw me put the handkerchief in my pocket as I left the kitchen. Now this could not have been the case, for if I had put it in my pocket at the bottom of the stairs, there it would have been when I got to the top, as I told her ; but she was as obstinate as a mule over it, and persisted, to my face, that I had put it in.”

“ I hope you will find it,” I said. “ It cannot be lost.”

“ I shan’t find it now,” she answered. “ But it was a new handkerchief of fine cambric. I gave a great deal for it.”

“ Could you have intended to put it in your pocket, and let it slip beside, on to the ground?” I suggested.

“ I don’t let things slip beside my pocket,” she tartly answered ; “ but, if I had, there it would have been, in the hall or on the stairs. Nobody had been there to pick it up in that minute, and both your teacher and myself can certify that it was not there. No ! that servant has it.”

“ Indeed she has not, Mrs. Nash ; I will be answerable for her. But why did you not tell me this at the time ?”

“ The notion came into my mind that I’d make no fuss, but lay a trap for Sarah. So I have left handkerchiefs about these rooms since, and other things. I put a brooch in a corner of the floor on Monday, and last night I clapped a sixpence under the hearth-rug, knowing she took it up every morning to shake.”

“ And the results,” I cried, feeling that I should blush to lay such “ traps ” for anyone.

“ I like my rights,” responded Mrs. Nash, “ and nobody will stand up in defence of their

own stouter than I will ; but to accuse a person without reason, isn't in my nature. So I am free to confess that the baits I have laid about have been left untouched. The girl found and brought me the brooch, saying she supposed it had fallen from my dress ; and this morning the sixpence was laid on the mantelpiece.

“ Yes, Sarah is strictly honest,” I affirmed, “ and wherever the handkerchief can have gone, she has not got it. Will you allow me to mention it to her ? ”

“ Oh yes, if you like. And I'm sure, if between you my property can be brought to light, I shall be glad and rejoice over it.”

“ Fidgety, pompous old cat,” uttered Sarah irreverently, when I went down and spoke to her. “ She put the handkerchief into her pocket as she left the kitchen ; I saw her cramming of it in with these two blessed eyes. She's been and mislaid it somewhere ;

in her bedroom, I'll be bound, for the things lie about there at sixes and sevens. She'll find it, ma'am, when she's not looking for it, never fear."

"Sarah, what in the world can have become of the young ladies?"

"The young ladies!" echoed Sarah; "aren't they come in?" For the girl had been on an errand for Mrs. Nash, and did not know to the contrary.

"Indeed they are not."

"I'm sure I thought nothing but what they were in, and in bed. Why, ma'am, it's twenty minutes past nine!"

"Where can they be? What is Miss Powis thinking about?"

"There's that noise again!" uttered Sarah, banging down her kitchen window as the sound of the drums and trumpets broke suddenly from the fair. "They are letting the folks out of the shows."

“ Now ! This is early to give over.”

“ Give over ! Law bless you, ma'am ! There's another repetition of the performance about to begin now : them tambourines and horns is to 'tice folks up. It won't be over till just upon eleven o'clock ; as you'd know if you slept back.”

It may have been ten minutes after that when we heard the side door open stealthily, and the young ladies come creeping in. I sprang towards them.

“ What has been the matter ? Where have you been ?” I reiterated.

“ We missed our way, and walked too far,” answered a voice from amongst them, though whose it was I did not recognise then, and no one will own to it since.

“ Very careless indeed, Miss Powis,” I uttered ; “ very wrong. The young ladies must be tired to death, walking all this time, especially the little ones.”

No one gave me any reply, and they all made for the staircase and bounded up it, Miss Powis after them, certainly not as if they were tired, more as if they wanted to get out of my sight. Young legs are indeed elastic, I thought to myself, little dreaming that those same legs had been at rest for the last two or three hours, the knees cramped between hard benches, and the feet buried in sawdust.

Several days passed on, and nothing occurred to arouse my suspicions about this fair escapade. On the Wednesday afternoon, our half-holiday, Mrs. Nash, in a fit of condescension, sent down an invitation for me, my sister, and Miss Powis to drink tea with her. As we could not all leave the young ladies, and we thought it might appear selfish if we went up ourselves and excluded Miss Powis (though she knew nothing of the invitation), Lucy said she would be the one to remain with the children.

A very good cup of tea Mrs. Nash gave us, and she entertained us with visions of her future greatness. The handsome fittings up of her new villa, the servants they intended to keep, the new open carriage about to be purchased, and the extensive wardrobe she both had and meant to have. "What do you think I gave for this?" she said, suddenly holding out her pocket-handkerchief. "Isn't it lovely : and I've a dozen of them."

"It is indeed a beautiful handkerchief," I said, examining its fine embroidery, and its trimming of broad Valenciennes lace. "It is unfit for common use."

"Yes, it is," answered Mrs. Nash. "But I used it at the hortercultural show yesterday, so thought I'd finish it up to-day. I gave eight-and-twenty shilling for that, at Swan and Edgar's, without the lace."

After tea, we took out our work. I proceeded to darn a lace collar, which was

beginning to drop into holes, and Miss Powis went on with her bead purse. Mrs. Nash said she could afford to put work out, and never did any. It happened that this collar had belonged to my mother, and we were comparing its lace, which was old point, with the Valenciennes round the handkerchief, when the gate bell rang, and Sarah came up and said a lady wanted me. So I laid my collar on the table, and went down to the parlour.

It was Mrs. Watkinson, who had come to pay the last quarter's bill for her niece's schooling. She sat talking some little time, and when she left I returned upstairs again, meeting on my way Miss Powis, who was running down them.

"I have worked up all my beads," she remarked to me in passing, "and am going to fetch some more." Making some trifling answer, I entered the drawing-room. Mrs.

Nash was standing at the window, watching two omnibuses which were galloping past.

“How them omnibuses do race, one against another!” she exclaimed. “If I was a magistrate, I’d have every omnibus-driver in London before me, and put ’em into gaol in a body, endangering people’s lives as they do! As soon as I have a carriage of my own, I shan’t want to trouble ’em much, thank the stars.”

I stood for a moment by her side, looking at the clouds of dust which the flying omnibuses raised behind them, and Mrs. Nash returned to her seat.

“Where’s my handkerchief gone?” she suddenly exclaimed.

I looked round. She was standing by the table, turning about all that was lying upon it — newspapers, my work, Miss Powis’s workbox, and other things. No handkerchief was there; and then she

looked about the room. "Where can it be?"

"Are you speaking of the handkerchief you had in use?" I asked.

"Yes, I am. It was on the table by me, by your work; I'm sure of that. That makes two gone. What an odd thing!"

I quite laughed at her. "It cannot be gone," I said; "it is impossible."

"Well, where is it, then? It can't have sunk through the floor."

That was clear. "Perhaps you have left it in the bedroom," I suggested.

"I have not been in the bedroom," returned Mrs. Nash angrily. "I have never stirred from my seat since tea, till I got up to look at them wicked omnibuses. As I turned from the window I put my hand in my pocket for my handkerchief and couldn't find it; then I remembered I had left it on the table, and I looked, and it

wasn't there, and it wasn't on my chair, and it isn't anywhere—as you see, Miss Halliwell. One would say you had fairies in the house.”

Just then Miss Powis returned. “What can I have done with my paper of beads?” she exclaimed, going up to her workbox and examining its contents. “Why, here they are, after all! How could I have overlooked them?”

“I have lost something worse than beads,” interposed Mrs. Nash. “My beautiful handkerchief. It's spirited away somewhere.”

Miss Powis laughed. “It was lying on the table for ever so long,” she said to Mrs. Nash. “You took it up and pressed it to your mouth, saying one of your lips was sore, and it was probably the salt from the shrimps you had taken at tea. After that, I think you put it in your pocket.”

“Are you sure it is not in your pocket now?” I eagerly inquired of Mrs. Nash.

“Goodness save us ; do you think I should say I hadn’t the handkerchief if I had?” returned Mrs. Nash in a passion. “Look for yourselves.” She whipped up her gown as she spoke—a handsome green satin, which she frequently wore—and displayed a white jean pocket resting on a corded petticoat. Rapidly emptying her pocket of its contents, she turned it inside out.

It certainly was not in her pocket, and she proceeded to shake her petticoats as if she were shaking for a wager. “It’s not about me ; I wish it was. Do you think either of you ladies can have put it into your pocket by mistake?”

“It is impossible that I can have done so,” I answered ; “because I was not in the room.”

“And equally impossible for me,” added

Miss Powis; "for I was not on that side of the table, and could only have taken it by purposely reaching over for it." Nevertheless we both, following the example of Mrs. Nash, proceeded to turn out our pockets. No signs of the handkerchief.

A complete hunt ensued. I begged Mrs. Nash to sit still, called up Sarah, and we proceeded to the search. Mrs. Nash's bedroom was also submitted to the ordeal, but she protested that if found there, it must have flown through the keyhole. She offered the keys of her drawers, and of the cupboard—if we liked to look, she said—and was evidently very much put out, and as much puzzled as we were. Later in the evening Miss Powis retired to take the children to bed, and Lucy came in.

"Now what is your opinion of this little bit of mystery?" asked Mrs. Nash, looking at me.

“I cannot give one,” I said; “I am unable to fathom it. It is to me perfectly unaccountable.”

“Your suspicions don’t yet point to the thief?”

“The thief! Oh, Mrs. Nash, pray do not distress me by talking in that way. The handkerchief will come to light, it *must* come to light: I assure you Sarah is no thief.”

“Oh, I don’t suspect Sarah now,” returned the lady. “It’s a moral impossibility that she could have had anything to do with the business this evening, and I am sorry to have accused her to you before. You are on the wrong scent, Miss Halliwell.”

I felt my face flush all over. Did she suspect ME?

“Ah, I see, light is dawning upon you,” she added.

“Indeed, indeed it is not,” I retorted

warmly. "We have no thief in this house : we never have had one yet."

"Well, you are certainly as unsuspicious as a child," she said. "Who has it—has both—but Miss Powis?"

"Miss Powis!" I and Lucy uttered together. "Impossible!"

"We none of us have it—have we? the room has not got it—has it? it can't have vanished into the earth or soared up to the skies, and I suppose none of us ate it. Then who can have it, but Miss Powis? The thing is as plain as a pikestaff. What made her rush out of the room on a sudden, pretending to go for her beads, when they were here all the while?"

"Miss Powis is quite a gentlewoman ; the family are very respectable, only reduced," broke in Lucy indignantly. "She would be no more capable of it than we should be."

"Oh, bother family gentility!" retorted

Mrs. Nash ; “ that doesn’t fill young girls’ pockets with pocket-money. I suppose she was hard up, and thought my handkerchiefs would help her to some.”

I felt too vexed to speak. Lucy began a warm reply, but was interrupted by Mrs. Nash.

“ I should like to know how she disposed of the first : I’ll stop her disposing of the last, for I’ll have her up before the Lord Mayor to-morrow morning. This comes of her going gallivanting, as she did, to those shows at the fair.”

“ What a dreadful calumny !” uttered Lucy.

“ She didn’t only go herself, but she took all the school,” coolly persisted Mrs. Nash, “ and they never arrived home till half-past nine at night. You two ladies, for school-mistresses, are rather innocent as to what’s going on around you.”

A sharp recollection, bringing its own pain, flashed across me of the night when the young ladies terrified me by remaining out so late. *Could* they have been to the fair? I was unable to offer a word.

“Have some of the girls in, and ask ’em, if you don’t believe me,” continued Mrs. Nash. “Not Miss Powis ; she’ll deny it.”

Lucy, full of indignant disbelief, flew upstairs, and brought down some of the elder girls : they had begun to undress, and had to apparel themselves again. I addressed them kindly, and begged them to speak the truth fearlessly : Did they go to the shows at the fair, or not ?

A dead silence, and then a very long drawn-out “Yes” from a faint voice. Lucy threw her hands up to her face : she was more excitable than I.

“That’s right, children,” cried Mrs. Nash : “never speak nothing but the truth, and

then you'll not get into trouble. And if—goodness save us, they are beginning to cry! Why, you have nothing to be frightened at. There's no great harm in going to shows: I have gone to 'em myself, hundreds of times."

"And what did you see?" groaned Lucy. "Speak up. I insist upon knowing. Everything."

"Lady Jane Grey, in waxwork, going to execution, in a black shroud and Protestant Prayer-book; and Henry the Eighth and his six wives, in white veils and silver fringe, one of them with a baby in three ostrich feathers; and the young Queen Victoria being crowned, with her hair let down, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, in a gray mitre and green whiskers, pouring oil on her—no, the mitre was green and the whiskers were gray; and Earl Rochester with a sword and an eye-glass, looking

through it at Nell Gwynne; and King William in a pilot-coat, drinking coffee with the Queen Dowager; and Jane Shore in a white sheet, and—oh, dear! we can't recollect all," was the answer Lucy received, with a burst of sobs between every sentence.

"Oh, you unhappy children!" responded Lucy. "And did all of you go into this waxwork?"

"N——o. Some went into the theatre."

"The theatre! What did you see there?"

"A play—very beautiful. About a princess who wanted to marry somebody, and her father wanted her to marry somebody else, and she died right off on the stage for love, amongst the wax-lights."

"Wax-lights!" repeated Mrs. Nash, with a hearty laugh. "Why, you innocents! they were nothing but halfpenny dips. Was there plenty of dancing and singing?"

"Y——es. The dancers were from the

opera in London, they say ; stars, condescendingly come from there because the season was over." And this made Mrs. Nash laugh again, but Lucy looked all the graver.

"Young ladies," I interposed, "I believe you have told me the truth : tell me a little more. How came you to go ? Who proposed it, or induced you ?"

"It was Miss Powis. She took us. Oh, indeed"—with a very genuine burst of sobs—"we should never have gone of ourselves."

"I told you so !" cried Mrs. Nash triumphantly, as Lucy left the room with the children. "I heard of it the next day from one of the workmen at my villa, who was there and saw them. But of course it was no business of mine—till now."



CHAPTER VII.

BEFORE THE MAGISTRATE.

THE scene in our house the following morning was beyond description. Mrs. Nash called in a policeman, and gave Miss Powis into custody for stealing her two handkerchiefs. The latter, in tears and the extreme of agitation, protested she had never touched either. There was an air of indignant truth about her, impossible, I thought, to be assumed. I am a great reader of countenances and manner, and I have some penetration, and I thought I could have staked my life upon the girl's innocence.

The policeman a little disenchanted me. "When you have had the experience we have, ma'am," he said, "you'll let assertions of innocence and aspects of truth go for what they are worth, and that's moonshine." Miss Powis offered the keys of her boxes, and insisted upon their being searched, and that her clothes should be examined. I thought she would have gone out of her senses, so great was her excitement, especially after her father arrived.

"Confess where the property is, and then I'll let you off," said Mrs. Nash, in answer to her impassioned appeals.

"I have not got it. I never had it. I swear it before Heaven!"

"Policeman, get a fly. We'll go up to the police-court."

"Be ye merciful, even as your Father which is in Heaven is merciful," broke in the pleading voice of Mr. Powis, a quiet gentle-

manly man, with a sad amount of care in his pale face. "I am sure, madam, my daughter is innocent: subject her not to this dreadful disgrace. The property may yet be found to have been mislaid."

"Moonshine, sir! as that policeman has just said about looks. Where can it have been mislaid to? up the chimney, or into the fire—when there was none in the grate?"

"I beseech you to show a little mercy. Give time. Think what your feelings would be if a child of your own were accused!"

"I never had no child, but one, and that died when it was only a week old," responded Mrs. Nash. "The fact is, sir, when young women have a propensity for dancing off to fair-shows and donkey-racing, it's no wonder if they help themselves to things not their own to pay for it."

"But Caroline has not been to such places!" uttered the astonished Mr. Powis.

“Hasn’t she, though! Policeman, what are you standing there for, doing nothing? If you don’t choose to get a fly, I’ll call in some other officer.”

We must have made a strange sight, driving away from our gate and up to London in that fly! Mrs. Nash, myself, Mr. Powis and his daughter inside, the latter sobbing hysterically, and the policeman on the box, beside the driver. Mr. Powis had already offered to pay the value of the handkerchiefs, for which the magistrate, afterwards, accused him of a wish to compound a felony; and I am sure I would have paid it twice over, rather than have had such a scandal emanating from my house. But Mrs. Nash would not listen: she said she did not want the value, she wanted the property.

It appeared to me that the sitting magistrate was a great brute, or else that he was,

that morning, in a dreadful temper. He is no longer a magistrate now, at least in this world, so it is of no consequence my recording my opinion. I have no clear recollection of the scene now, and never did have ; I was too much bewildered and annoyed. I know that the court appeared to me a Babel of staring eyes and confusion, and I felt thoroughly ashamed of being within it.

“What’s your name?” growled the magistrate when the case was called on.

“Caroline Frances Powis, sir,” said her father.

“Can’t she answer for herself, sir?” was the surly rejoinder. “Ever here before, officer?”

“No, your worship. Not unfavourably known. In fact, not known at all.”

I need not give the particulars of the examination, having already mentioned the facts. I know I was called as evidence, and

never knew afterwards how I gave it. I dare say the Court thought I was a great simpleton.

“Now, young woman,” growled the magistrate, “what have you to say to this?”

She was a great deal too hysterical to say anything ; and I must remark that his manner was enough to terrify the most innocent prisoner into an appearance of guilt. The old—I was going to write fool, but I'll put magistrate—committed her for trial. I thought I should have fainted when I heard it. And to have witnessed the graceless crowd assembled there bursting into a titter when it came out that our young ladies had gone to the show-booths on the sly ! My cheeks are tingling with the recollection now.

He said he would admit her to bail ; and whilst Mr. Powis went out to get it we were put into a dark, dirty room of the Court—locked in, I dare say. After that—it was a

long time—we rode home again, but Mrs. Nash was not with us then. People asked why I remained when the examination was over ; but I could not find it in my heart to leave the poor thing alone : I should never have reconciled it to my conscience afterwards.

“ She must go to your house, Mr. Powis,” I whispered to him as the fly was nearing home ; “ I may not take her again to mine.”

“ You do not believe her guilty ?” he rejoined.

I was puzzled what to answer. That morning I would have heartily said No ; but the thought had been imperceptibly insinuating itself into my mind, in the atmosphere of that police-court—if she did not take the handkerchiefs, where were they ? That going to the fair had its bias on my judgment ; it had weighed heavily with the magistrate, *and I saw it was beginning to do so with her father.* Disobedience, as I told you, is sure to bring

its own punishment. So she went to her father's home, and we procured another teacher.

Now, it was a strange thing, but some days afterwards Caroline Powis was attacked with measles. Perhaps she caught the disease in the Court; I shall always think so, for we were brought into contact with sundry poverty-stricken, ghastly-looking people, and there was not a single case of it in our neighbourhood. She had never had the disorder, and was extremely ill, the doctor, at one time, giving no hope of her. But she grew better, and when all danger of my carrying the infection back to the school was past, I went to see her. She was lying in bed, looking thin and white, but a hectic flush spread over her cheeks when she saw me.

"I am sorry to see you here, my dear," I said; "I hoped you were up long since."

"I hope I shall never get up again," she

eagerly answered; "I do not wish to. All the world believes me guilty."

"Not all the world," I said soothingly. Poor thing! Whether culpable or not, I was grieved to see her lying there, so lonely and wobegone.

"Yes, they do. My father, my brothers and sisters, even my mother, all believe it now. I am sure you do, Miss Halliwell. They harp so much upon my having gone to the shows, and say if I did the one I might have done the other. I hope I shall never get up from here again. And the thought of the trial terrifies me night and day. It comes over me as a dreadful nightmare, from which I try to escape and cannot; and then I scream with terror."

"That is true," Mrs. Powis said to me when we went downstairs. "If she suddenly wakes up in the night her terror is so great that I have to hasten from my room to soothe

her. She asserts that she shall never get up from her bed again, and I do not think she will. The dread of this disgrace, of her standing in public to be tried as a common criminal, seems literally to be killing her by inches. Caroline was always so sensitive."

My recollection is not clear upon one point : whether she ought to have been tried before the long vacation, or whether the trial was originally fixed for after the assembling of the Courts in November. I think the former, and that it was postponed on account of her illness. At any rate, November came in, and she had not been tried. Oh, those long, weary months to her ! Poor girl !

The week of the trial came ; it was to be on a Thursday, and on the previous Monday evening Mrs. Powis called at our house. It was quite late—had struck eight o'clock—and Lucy and I were just sitting down to our homely supper. I pressed her to take some.

She would not, but accepted a glass of wine.

“Poor Caroline wants to see you, Miss Halliwell,” she said to me. “She has been dwelling upon it these many days, but more than ever this afternoon.”

“How is she?” I and Lucy eagerly asked.

“I think she is dying,” was the answer. “I do not believe she will be alive on Thursday—the day she has so much dreaded. Of course, the trial will be put off again, for she could not be moved from her bed to attend it.”

The words shocked me greatly, and Lucy let fall her knife upon her cheese-plate, and chipped a piece out of it.

“To tell you the truth,” continued poor Mrs. Powis, bursting into tears, “I have held back from asking you to come; but her urgency this evening has been so great, I could refuse no longer. I do so fear,” she

hesitated, dropping her voice to a whisper, "that she may be going to *confess* to you, as she thinks she is about to die ; and to know that she has confessed her guilt would almost kill me. Though her father has been inclined to judge her harshly, I have unconsciously clung with hope to her constant assertions of innocence."

"Do you wish me to come to-night?"

"Oh no. I had a minute's leisure this evening, and so ran out. Come to-morrow, if that will suit you."

"But to be dying," interposed Lucy ; "it seems so strange ! What complaint has she ? What is she dying of?"

"A galloping consumption, as the doctor says, and as I believe," answered Mrs. Powis. "My father went off in the same way, and my only sister. They were both well, and ill, and dead in two months, and—unlike her—had no grief to oppress them. Caroline might

not have lived, even if this unhappy business had never occurred ; the measles seemed to take such hold upon her constitution. Then I may tell her you will come, Miss Halliwell ?”

“ Yes, indeed. I will come as soon as I can, after morning school.”

Mrs. Powis left, and I and Lucy sat over the fire, talking. “ I would give something,” she said, in a musing manner, “ to know whether Caroline Powis was really guilty. I fear she was : but if it had not been for that show-going, to believe her guilty would have been more difficult.”

“ Lucy, she was certainly guilty. What else could have become of the pocket-handkerchiefs ? And her conduct since, this excessive prostration and grief, is scarcely consistent with conscious innocence.”

May the angels, who heard that uncharitable opinion of mine, blot out its record ! Cause of repentance for having uttered it

came to me very shortly, proving how chary we ought to be in condemning others, even when appearances and report are against them. “*Who art thou that presumest to judge another?*”

After twelve the next morning, I put on my bonnet and shawl, and was going out at the door when Lucy ran up, and called to me.

“Hester, you may as well step into the dressmaker’s, as you will pass her door,” she said. “Ask her whether she means to let us have our new dresses home or not, and when. She has had them nearly a month, and never been to try them on.”

Upon what trifling circumstances great events turn!

I went into the dressmaker’s on my way. Her assistant and the two apprentices were in the workroom, but not herself.

“Miss Smith won’t be two minutes,

ma'am," said one of them; "she is only upstairs, trying on a lady's mantle. Or shall we give her any message?"

No, I determined to wait and see her myself, for I had sent her messages without end, and the dresses seemed none the nearer. She was always overwhelmed with work. So I sat down. One of the young women was busy with a green satin dress, unpicking the lining from the skirt. I knew it at once.

"Is not that Mrs. Nash's?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am," answered the assistant. "She has got the bottom of the skirt jagged out and dirty, so we are going to let it down from the top and take the bad in, and put in a new lining. There's plenty of satin turned in at the top—a good three inches. She says she always has her gowns made so. It's not a bad plan."

Miss Smith came in, and I was talking to her, when the young person who was unpick-

ing the dress suddenly exclaimed: "My patience! what's this?"

We both turned. She was drawing something from between the lining and the satin skirt, and we all pressed round to look. *It was an embroidered handkerchief.*

"As sure as fate it is the one the rumpus was about!" uttered Miss Smith, in excitement; "the one poor Miss Powis was accused of stealing. What a providential coincidence, ma'am, that you stepped in, and were here to witness it!"

"Look if there's another," I said to the young girl; "there were two lost." And she bent down her face, and looked in between the lining and the dress.

"Here's something else," she said. "Yes, sure enough, it is another handkerchief. But this is a plain one."

It was even so. After months of agitation to many, and of more than agitation to

Caroline Powis, the two lost handkerchiefs were brought to light in this mysterious manner. It appeared that the sewing of the pocket-hole, the thread which attached the lining to the satin, had come undone, and when Mrs. Nash had put, as she thought and intended, the handkerchiefs into her pocket, each had slipped down between the lining and the dress. The truth might have been detected earlier, but she had scarcely had the gown on since leaving my house : in its present "jagged" state, it was deemed too shabby for the splendours of the new villa.

When I went out at Miss Smith's door, I stopped and hesitated. Should I go to Caroline Powis, or should I go to Mrs. Nash? That I would visit both I fully determined on. Better ease *her* mind first.

I was shocked at the alteration in her appearance when I entered her chamber : the

attenuated features, their hectic flush, and the wandering eye. She struggled up in bed when she saw me.

“Oh, Miss Halliwell,” she eagerly exclaimed, “I thought you were never coming! I am going to die—even the doctor admits that there is no hope. I have wanted to tell you, once again, that I am innocent of that dreadful thing—and you will not think I would utter anything but truth in dying.”

“Dear child,” I said, “I have news for you. Your innocence is proved to me, to your mother—for I have just told her; there she stands, sobbing with joy—and it will soon be proved to the whole neighbourhood. The handkerchiefs are found and you are exculpated. Providence, who is ever merciful, has brought the truth to light in His own mysterious way.”

It affected her so much less than I had

anticipated ! There was no burst of excitement, no fainting, very little increase of the hectic flush. She sank back upon her pillow and clasped her hands upon her bosom. It may be that she was too near the portals of another world for the joys or sorrows of this one violently to affect her.

“ I have had but one prayer while lying here,” she whispered, at length : “ that God would make manifest my innocence ; if not before my death, after it. Dear mamma ”—holding out her hand—“ my father will not be ashamed of me now. And for the going to the shows—that surely may be forgiven me, for I have suffered deeply for it. Tell the truth to all the schoolgirls, Miss Halliwell.”

When I went to Mrs. Nash’s, which I did at once, that lady was seated in great state in her dining-room, eating her luncheon, for she had taken to fashionable hours now.

It was served on an elegant service of Worcester china, and consisted of pork chops and pickles, mashed potatoes, apple-tart and cheese, with wine and ale. She did not invite me to partake of it, which compliment I thought would have been only polite, as there was abundance. Not that I should have done so. But in her new grandeur, we schoolmistresses were deemed very far beneath her.

“Well,” she said, “have you come about this bothering trial? Take a seat; there, by the fire if you like. I hear it is to be put off again.”

“Put off for good, I think, Mrs. Nash.”

“Put off for good! What do you mean? If the judges think to grant a reprieve or pardon, or whatever it’s called, and so squash the affair before it comes on, my husband shall show ’em up in the courts for it. I’ll make him. I don’t say but what I’m sorry

for the girl and her long illness, but then she shouldn't have been obstinate, and refused to confess. I can't help fancying, too, that the illness is part sham—a dodge to escape the trial altogether.”

“You talk about her confessing, Mrs. Nash, but suppose she had nothing to confess, that she was really innocent: what else could she have done than deny it?”

“Suppose the world's made of soft soap,” broke forth Mrs. Nash scornfully. “How can you be such a gaby, Miss Halliwell? Why, you are almost as old as I am—oh, yes, you are! Not quite, may be; but when one dies from old age, the other will be quaking. If Caroline Powis did not steal the handkerchiefs, where did they go to, pray? Stuff!”

“They are found,” I said.

She was carrying the tumbler of ale to her mouth, for she had continued her meal

without heed to my presence, but she stared at me, and put it down untasted.

“The handkerchiefs are found, Mrs. Nash, and I have seen them.”

“Where were they? Who found them? Who took them?” she asked, reiterating question upon question. “Has she given them up, thinking I’ll let her off from being tried?”

“Do you remember, ma’am, that the day you lost the handkerchiefs you had on your green satin gown? Both days.”

“Green satin gown! For all I know, I had. What has that to do with it?”

“They were unpicking the gown this morning at Miss Smith’s, and inside the lining——”

“What are you going to tell me?” screamed Mrs. Nash, as if a foreshadowing of the truth had flashed upon her, whilst she threw down her knife and fork on the

table, and pushed her chair away from it. "I declare you quite frighten me, with your satin gowns and your unpicking, and your long, mysterious face. Don't go and say I have accused the girl unjustly!"

"Between the lining and the dress they found the two handkerchiefs," I quietly proceeded. "They must have fallen in there, the hemming of the pocket-hole being unsewn, when you thought you were putting them into your pocket. Sarah persisted, if you remember, that she saw you putting the first in, a few minutes before you missed it."

I never saw such a countenance as hers at that moment. She turned as red as fire, and her mouth gradually opened and remained so. Presently she started up, speaking in much excitement.

"Come along, Miss Halliwell. I'll go to the dressmaker's, and have this out at

once ; confirmed or denied. Lawk-a-mercy ! what reparation can I make to Caroline Powis ?”

There was no reparation to be made. In vain Mrs. Nash sent jellies and blancmanges, and wings of chicken, and fiery port-wine to tempt the invalid back to life ; in vain she drove daily up in her own carriage with her own liveried coachman (“ Such an honour for the like of that little cottage of the Powises !” quoth the neighbours), and sat by Caroline’s bedside, and made all sorts of magnificent promises to her, if she would only get well ; in vain she sent Mr. Powis’s landlord a cheque for the quarter’s rent, hearing there was some little difficulty about its payment, for Caroline’s illness had been expensive and had run away with all the ready money ; and in vain she put the youngest child, a boy rising nine, into the Bluecoat School, through an influential butcher, who

was a Common Councilman and very great in his own ward, and her husband's particular friend. Nothing recalled poor Caroline. "But don't grieve," she said to Mrs. Nash on the eve of her departure; "I am going to another and a better world." And she went to it.

Now it is quite possible, and indeed probable, that Caroline Powis would have died whether this disgrace had fallen on her or not, for consumption, very rapid consumption, was hereditary in her family. But the effect the unpleasant circumstances had upon me was lasting, and I made a resolve that if I lost all the pocket-handkerchiefs I possessed in the world, and had not so much as a half one left for use, I would never prosecute anyone for stealing them.

Should any be inclined to question [this little episode in my domestic experience, I can only say that it is strictly true, and

occurred exactly as I have related it. If Mrs. Nash is indignant with me for telling it, though so many years have since passed, and she still lives close by, I cannot help it, and I am under no obligation to her.





CHAPTER VIII.

THE CLERGYMAN'S HOME.

A NUMBER of clergy were pouring out of the town of Chelsbro', for the Archdeacon had that day held a visitation in its cathedral. Some who were not pressed for time or funds had proceeded from the cathedral to one or other of the hotels to take up their quarters for the night, but by far the larger portion turned their way to their country homes. We must notice one, who set out to walk. He was of middle height and slender frame, with a look, not altogether of ill-health about him, but as if he had none

too much superfluous strength. A walk of nine miles was before him, and the cold evening was drawing on. He glanced up at the skies dubiously. They threatened rain, and he was not well protected from it, if it came, for he was only in his black clothes and white neckcloth. He had a great-coat at home, but it was shabby : the seams were white, and there was a piece let in at one of the elbows, and it was darned under the arms, so he had not dared to put it on that morning, when he was going to mix with his brother clergy.

And now that Chelsbro' was left behind and he was on the lonely road, where he was likely to meet few, if any, observers, he drew off his black gloves, and, diving into a pocket of his coat, pulled out some bread-and-butter, wrapped in a piece of paper. He proceeded to eat it with the air of a man whose appetite is dainty or has passed. His had, for he had

fasted since the morning ; but he knew that to keep up his strength at all he must eat, and, failing good food, he must eat plain. But the butter was salt and made him thirsty, and he felt giddy with his long confinement in the cold cathedral, and his limbs shrank from the walk before him.

“ This will never do,” he murmured, looking at his small stock of money, which proved to be eighteenpence. “ I wonder if I could afford a glass of ale ? To do so, I must change the sixpence.”

He turned, with a sigh—for sixpences with him were not to be changed lightly—into a public-house which stood on the roadside. The landlady came forward from the bar.

“ A glass of ale, if you please, Mrs. Finch, to fortify me for my walk.”

“ With pleasure, sir. Please step into the parlour. We have just got in some famous

double stout ; perhaps you would prefer a glass of that ?”

The clergyman hesitated. He would have preferred the stout : it was a luxury he did not often taste ; but he feared the price might be more than the ale. He could not for shame ask : the blush mantled in his pale cheek at the thought. So he said he would take ale, and the landlady brought it, and stood by gossiping while he drank it.

“ You have a smart walk afore you, sir,” she remarked, as he prepared to depart ; “ and I am afeared it will rain. You don’t look over-strong to face it ; not as hearty, sir, as when you was last by here, in the summer.”

“ I must put my best foot foremost.”

“ We shall soon be a-going to tea, sir, if you’d wait—if I might make so bold as offer to send you a cup in here, with a bit of ham—a beauty we have in cut,” resumed the

kind-hearted landlady, scanning her visitor's slender form and knowing his slender income.

"Thank you," he interrupted; "you are very kind, but I must not spare the time: I must get on before the rain comes. One of my parishioners is also dangerously ill, and on his account I must not delay. Good-afternoon, Mrs. Finch: once more, thank you much."

He walked on, and had gained the fourth milestone when the rain began heavily. Some trees formed a shelter by the roadside, and he halted under them, the bent, twisted trunk of one affording a sort of seat. He removed his hat, and rubbed his forehead with his handkerchief. It was a wide, expansive forehead, but the hair was wearing off the temples, as it often does with those who have a weight of thought or care upon them. The skies looked dark around, as if the rain had set in for the night, and the

gray of the evening was coming on. He watched the rain gloomily enough. The prospect of soaking his new clothes, and so causing them to shrink, was not a cheering one, for it was indeed hidden in the womb of time when he might be able to provide himself with another suit. But there was a darker fear still. Last winter, and the winter before, and for several winters previous to that, a suspicion of rheumatism had flown about him, and Jessup, the doctor, had warned him, not a week ago, that a good wetting might fix it on him. He could not fail being wet to the skin, if he walked five miles in that rain.

Just then the sound of wheels was heard, on the Chelsbro' side, and the clergyman looked eagerly in the direction. Should it be any farmer in his gig who knew him, or a parishioner, they would give him a lift.

It was neither farmer nor parishioner. It

was the luxurious carriage of the Reverend Mr. Cockburn, his fellow-labourer at Chel-son. He was being driven home from the visitation. He happened to be looking from the right-hand window as he passed—a stout, red-faced man—but he did not stop the carriage, or offer the vacant seat at his side. “He may not have seen me,” murmured the poor clergyman to himself, as he gazed wistfully after the wheels of the fast-retreating chariot. “Though I did think, until to-day, that he would have invited me to go and return with him.”

It sped out of sight, and he had nothing to do but watch the rain again. His thoughts reverted to the contrast in his position with that of the rich man who had driven by. Not always could he prevent their reverting to it. It was almost a case of Dives and Lazarus: The Reverend Mr. Cockburn was the rector of St. Paul’s, one of the two

churches at Chelson. The living was worth fourteen hundred a year, and he had also a private fortune. His table was luxurious, his servants were many, he had carriages and saddle-horses, he went out every summer for three months—it was necessary for his health, he represented to the Bishop of Chelsbro', and for that of Mrs. Cockburn—but when he was at home he took no trouble with his parish, all the hard work in it being turned over to his curate. *He*, the Reverend Alfred Halliwell, with his delicate wife and seven children, could find but a bare allowance of clothes and food, for St. Stephen's living, of which he was the incumbent, was not worth one hundred and fifty pounds, all told. He was a more eloquent man in the pulpit than he who had driven past, was more learned in theology, had taken higher honours at the university; he was more active in parish labours than that gentleman

and his curate put together ; yet he could scarcely live, whilst Mr. Cockburn—"I am getting into this dissatisfied train of thought again," he meekly uttered. "Lord, keep me from it !"

There seemed to be no probability of the rain leaving off. Of course he could not remain under the trees all night, so he rose and walked on in it. Before he reached Chelson he was thoroughly wetted, and glad enough he was to see the lights of the town. It was dark then ; and as he passed by the railings of a large house at the town entrance, the glare of light from the windows of its reception-rooms struck upon his eyes. Fires were blazing in both : the blinds being drawn down in one, but in the other he saw the cloth laid for dinner, and the rich wine in the decanters was glittering in the fire-light. Involuntarily he halted to contemplate the picture of luxury and comfort, but at that

moment the clocks rang out seven, and he hastened on. It was the residence of Mr. Cockburn.

A few minutes more brought him to the door of his own home, a newly-erected, small red-brick house. He had been obliged to remove from the vicarage, for the damp there had threatened to lay him up for life. His wife never had her health ; his children were continually ailing ; and at length Mr. Jessup said if they wished to live they must leave the vicarage. So he took this house near, which reduced his scanty income by two-and-twenty pounds.

He knocked at the door, and a troop of eager feet ran to it. His second and third children were girls of ten and nine : they wore soiled merino frocks and ragged pinafores. " Oh, papa !" exclaimed Emma, " how wet you are !"

He laid his hand fondly on as many heads

as came within its reach, and went into the parlour. His wife was lying on the sofa, and the fire had gone out.

“Why, Mabel! No fire! I am drenched and shivering.”

She rose up, pressing her temples. “You naughty children! How could you let the fire out? Why did you not look to it? Oh, Alfred, I have had such a day with these boys! It is always the same: the moment you are gone they turn the house out of its windows with uproar. I ceased to speak to them at last, and lay down with a pillow over my ears. My head is splitting!”

“Have you any tea?” inquired Mr. Halliwell, too familiar with these complaints to take much notice of them.

“I’m sure I don’t know whether Betty kept the tea-pot. Annie, go and see.”

“Papa,” cried George, the eldest—a high-spirited boy of eleven—running in, “Betty

says she has some warm dry things for you, for she guessed you would be wet. And she says you had better change them by the kitchen fire, and she'll put the young ones to bed the while."

He went shivering into the kitchen, thankful that there was a fire somewhere and someone to think of him. Betty, the prop and stay of the domestic house, was little altered, except in age, and her hair was more gray and untidy than ever. At the time of the vicar's marriage she had been discharged for a more stylish servant; but when things grew hard with them they were glad to take on old Betty and her worth again. Younger servants liked to dress finely, and were perpetually wanting their wages, which could not always conveniently be paid. Betty never asked for hers; and, let her fare as hard as she would, never complained of the food. She had her faults: does anyone

know a servant without them? Her chief one was a crabbed temper; Mrs. Halliwell called it "cross-grained." However, Betty was never cross-grained with her master: she held him in too high reverence.

"Why, master," she exclaimed, "if you are not dripping wet! Couldn't you borrow no umbrella, nor coat, nor nothing? Do, pray, make haste, sir, and get the things off."

"Papa," cried a sturdy young fellow, who had sat himself down on the warm bricks before the kitchen fire, "do you know they have been to say——"

"Now, Master Tom, hold your tongue," interposed Betty sharply. "Kiss your papa, and say good-night, and I'll take you and some of the rest to bed. Sir, don't lose no time, for I know you must be a-catching cold."

"Good-night, Thomas," he said, stooping

to kiss the child. "Stay : have you said your prayers?"

"Oh, I'll hear him his prayers," answered Betty, in tones that savoured somewhat of irreverence. "You get them things off, sir." Betty shut the door, and took Tom and three more upstairs to bed. She was not long over it : there was no time to be long over anything in that house. When she returned, the vicar had put on the warm clothes, and was arranging the wet ones.

"They have let the fire out in the parlour," she began. "I never did see such a house as this. If I don't have my eye over everything, it goes wrong. I took in a fresh box of coal, and told 'em to be sure and keep up a good fire for you : and missis lies down, and the others gets playing, and of course out it goes. Such a noise as there have been all day ! enough to drive one crazy. Missis don't keep 'em in order one

bit, and if I goes to do it, she's angry with me. Master, you'll have your tea by the fire here, won't you?"

"Is there any tea?" was the reply.

"Why, sir! and the teapot on the trivet, there, a-staring you in the face! I made it after they had done theirs, so it have been a-stewing long enough. Did you think, sir, I had put it there empty, with nothing in it?"

He had not thought about it. His outer eyes had no doubt seen the teapot, standing above the fire, but his mind was absent, and he could not have told whether it was a teapot or a saucepan, or, indeed, whether it was anything at all.

"I'll see to them, sir," cried Betty, whisking the wet clothes out of his hand; "you can't do no good with them." She then drew a small round table close to the fire, put a cup and saucer on it, with a little bit of

cold steak and some bread, and poured out the tea.

“ Betty ! that was what went out for your dinner,” exclaimed Mrs. Halliwell, who had come into the kitchen, and sat down by her husband. “ You must have eaten nothing.”

“ I ate enough,” crossly responded Betty, who had an angry aversion to being reminded of her own acts of kindness. “ Meat don’t agree with me, and I have said so twenty times ; I prefers potatoes. I wish it had been more for master : he must want it bad enough, after his walk.”

“ I trust you have not taken cold, Alfred,” said Mrs. Halliwell, in a concerned tone. “ Oh—did Betty tell you Stokes’s servant came down just before you returned ? He was worse, and had asked for the Sacrament.”

Up started Mr. Halliwell. “ I’ll go at once,” he said ; “ why did you not tell me ?”

“ Now, ma’am !” remonstrated Betty, “ as if you could not have let him drink his tea in peace ! I warned the children not to say anything till their papa was dry and comfortable ; and they didn’t, only Tom, and I stopped him. Sit still, sir, and finish your morsel of meat. Old Stokes ain’t a-going off this minute ; he ain’t in such a mortal hurry as all that. You have plenty of time.”

He thought not. He was ever most anxious to fulfil his duties, especially towards the poor and the sick ; few clergymen had a deeper sense of their great responsibility in the sight of God. He swallowed the meat standing, gulped down the scalding tea, put on his old great-coat, and started off into the wet again.

The reader may glean that the Reverend Alfred Halliwell’s life was cast in a sea of perplexity, and so his sister Hester found it

when she went to stay a week with them about this time. She had not been to Chelson since that first visit, twelve years ago, and had not seen Mabel since her marriage. All she could do, at first, was to look at her, for she had never seen so great an alteration in anyone. Instead of two-and-thirty, she looked two-and-forty ; and her countenance wore a sad, unresisting expression, as if she could lie down under troubles, but never battle with them.

“It is the hard life I live,” she said, in answer to a remark of Hester’s ; “the constant anxiety, the worry and trouble of the children. Ah, Miss Halliwell ! do you remember begging me to consider the future well before I hastened to marry upon so small an income ? You told me that the daily crosses and privations, inseparable from a home of poverty, pressed more heavily upon the wife than upon the husband.”

“ I do remember it, Mabel.”

“ If I had only listened to you ! But mamma was most to blame. She must have known how difficult it was to exist upon such a living as Alfred’s. I think they were all mad in those days.”

“ Who ?” asked Hester.

“ The girls of Chelson and their mothers. From the moment Alfred was appointed here, they began to hunt him down, as dogs hunt a hare. Mamma kept me in the background because she wanted my elder sisters to marry first ; but I was led away by example and the popular mania, contrived meetings with the new clergyman for myself, and he chose me. Oh ! that it had been any of them, instead of me ! Not that I regret it, except in a pecuniary light. Alfred has been an excellent husband to me—one in ten thousand. But this wearing, hopeless poverty is enough to turn my brain.”

“Mabel, I do think you might have managed a little better.”

“I know I was a bad manager at first, but the best management will not stave off sickness; and it is sickness which has so pulled us down. The vicarage was such a place to live in! You saw nothing of it: you were only there in the summer months: but in winter the damp positively ran down the walls. How the children were reared in it, I don't know; but I believe another winter in it would have done for Alfred. Once we were all down, except Alfred and Betty and one of the boys, with an infectious fever. I cannot tell the money we owe Mr. Jessup.”

“I am sorry to hear it,” said Hester.

“It must be a great deal. He has never sent in his bill. I will say that everyone has been most considerate to us. Alfred has given him small sums off it from time to

time, as he could afford. But with so many children to clothe and feed, what can be spared out of two pounds a week ?”

“ You have more than that, Mabel.”

“ Very little, I can assure you. In the first year or two of our marriage we got into debt ; and yet I strove to be contriving and economical. But I suppose I had not the knack of it ; I was so inexperienced ; and we began life more as I had been accustomed to live at my mother’s. People were free enough to blame us, I heard ; but I declare that we had no ill intention : it seemed that the more we strove to save, the deeper into debt we fell. My illnesses were expensive, and they came on so rapidly ; and I had the luck at those times of having a selfish nurse and an extravagant servant, who managed the housekeeping between them, and pretty bills came in ! Then we had bought some furniture on our marriage, and that debt

embarrassed us. So Alfred came to the resolution of borrowing a few hundreds——”

“It was the worst resolution he could have come to,” interrupted Hester.

“Well, he did it. But we believed that at papa's death we should be able to pay off everything, and be beforehand with the world. But when poor papa did die, we found there was nothing : mamma, even, was left badly off. So, ever since, we have been struggling to pay off this money : a little one year and a little another, besides the interest. Oh, Hester, I am weary of life ! The same cares, the same pinchings, from year's end to year's end. Matilda has never forgiven me for marrying Alfred ; for she counted on having him herself ; but she is much better off than I am—she is out as nursery governess, and gets thirty pounds a-year. Girls are so eager to be married ; but they would be less so if they could take a peep into the

mirror of the future. 'Marry in haste, and repent at leisure.'"

The children now began to come into the room. Hester had seen the elder ones the previous night, but the rest had gone to bed when she arrived.

"What is the matter with this one?" she hastily exclaimed, as a sickly-looking little thing limped in behind the rest.

"That is David," said Mrs. Halliwell. "We fear he was thrown down; for, when about two years old, he suddenly grew lame, and then abscesses formed. He is never without them. But his health does not seem to suffer: and he has a great appetite."

The child looked up at Hester, with his wan face and his dreamy brown eyes, betraying so much mind. He gave a faint cry when she took him on her knee.

"Do I hurt you, my little boy?"

"It always hurts me," he answered. "Not much."

"Now, children," said their mamma, "run into the kitchen. You are to have your breakfast there this morning. Sam, don't look so gloomy : Betty has some treacle."

"Oh," shouted Sam, "that's famous !" And he rushed off, followed by the others. Hester kept David on her knee.

"Let him go with the rest, Hester," said Mrs. Halliwell. "If he remains here he will be wanting the eggs. Betty is boiling three for us."

"Oh, Mabel ! if he does !" she involuntarily exclaimed. "How can you begrudge an egg to this sickly child ?"

Mabel looked at her sister-in-law until the tears stood in her eyes. "Begrudge it ! I would *sell* myself to procure proper food for my children, but if it cannot be procured, what am I to do ? We had these eggs in,

because you were coming, and we could not put one on the table for you, and go without ourselves ; it would make our poverty too conspicuous. You see, you are making me betray the secrets of our prison-house," she added, with a bad attempt at merriment.

"I really beg your pardon, Mabel. I spoke without reflection."

"You only spoke as others would have spoken—all who possess not my bitter experience. It is a shame," resumed Mrs. Halliwell, in tones of deep indignation, "that the Church of England should pay her ministers so badly ! Its glaring contrasts are enough to sicken one of religion, as pertaining to the Establishment. Who can wonder that we have so many Dissenters ? Look no further than this town : the one church giving its minister fourteen hundred a year, the other only one hundred and fifty : and the worst paid has the most to do—

double, nearly, of the other. Why should not these livings be rendered more equal?"

"I suppose it could not be done, under the present system," said Hester.

"Then the system should be changed," returned Mrs. Halliwell. "It is a crying sin, Hester, that a gentleman who has dedicated his life to the service of the Church should be paid less than a common mechanic. Alfred makes me wild, because he takes things so patiently. I know he feels them, but he never complains or murmurs; and when I break out, which I can't help doing, he goes on, in his mild, stupid, uncomplaining way, about *bearing* one's cross in patient silence. I can't, and I don't try to."

"Where is he?" inquired Hester, thinking it might be as well, just then, not to argue the point. "Not up yet?"

"Don't you know? He is at church, reading prayers. That is the reason we are

waiting breakfast. Nothing would satisfy some of the people but they must have a daily service at eight ; so the two churches take it alternately, two months each, and Alfred's turn is on at present. He is worked nearly off his legs. This is a straggling parish, with many poor, and always some sick. Then there are the schools to attend to, and the different charity clubs and meetings, and the service on the saints' days ; and, if you please, the church has now to be opened twice a week, from eleven till twelve, and Alfred has to stick himself there, in case any baptisms or churchings come in. A parcel of rubbish !"

Hester could not help laughing, Mrs. Halliwell brought out the last sentence with such intense indignation.

"Well, I have cause to say it," she went on. "If they work Alfred so much, they ought to pay him better. He had two

pupils who were reading with him, and their pay helped him a great deal ; but when they put on all these new-fashioned duties, he was compelled to give them up. *It is a shame.*"

Just then Mr. Halliwell returned, and Betty entered with the coffee-pot and the three eggs. She then went round to take up David. He was unwilling to go, and clung to Hester.

"Ah, that's because he has seen the eggs here," cried Mrs. Halliwell.

"I have cooked him one," interposed Betty. "I talked to old Knight at the shop last night, till he gave me one into the shilling's worth, so I have boiled it for him. Missis have got her number all the same, I thought, and it will do Davy no harm. Come along, Master Davy."

It was Wednesday, Mr. Halliwell's day for going to the church, and he left at eleven o'clock. After that, Mrs. Halliwell came

down with her things on. Little David had gone to Hester again, and she had him on her knee.

“I am obliged to go out on some business,” she said. “I am sorry to leave you.”

“Oh, I shall amuse myself very well, talking to Davy. Where are the children?”

“Their papa has set them to their lessons. Their education gets on very badly, Alfred is obliged to be out so much. If you hear them making a noise, just go and give it them, please. They are in the next room. Betty has the young one with her.”

Mrs. Halliwell departed, and Hester and Davy sat making acquaintance with each other, till Betty went into the room with a full box of coal. She stumbled over a stool that stood in the way, and several lumps rolled on to the worn-out old carpet.

“Now then! bother the stool! Them children’s always a-leaving something in the

way. Our eyes don't get no younger, ma'am, nor we neither."

"No, that we don't, Betty. But you seem to be as active and well as ever."

"There's no chance to be otherwise here. Sometimes I threatens to leave it ; but that's when I'm cross."

"Where have you left the little one, Betty?"

"Oh, I've stuck him up to the kitchen table, and tied him in a chair, with a tin baking-dish afore him, and an old iron spoon. That's what I always does with him when I'm busy ; and he knocks away there for an hour and thinks it's music. How do you think master's looking, ma'am?"

"Pretty well, Betty. He was never over-strong in appearance. I think your mistress looks extremely ill."

"Missis has a deal to do, and she don't get good things enough to keep up her

strength. Do you know where she's gone now?"

"No."

"She is gone out to give a music lesson. She has took to teaching the pianor."

"Teaching the piano!" uttered Hester.

"I don't know as I ought to have told," proceeded Betty, "for missis ain't fond of having it spoke of. Not that she cares, herself; but them Zinks gives themselves such airs. When they first heered of it, they came here, and made such an uproar as never was. Old Mother Zink—— Ma'am," broke off Betty, "I hope you will excuse me, but I can't abide that old lady. She was a-pushing all her daughters at the head of master, in those old times, and she got her will and snapped him up for one of 'em, and now she comes here, a-turning up her nose, and says he doesn't pervide her daughter with things suitable to her station! Well,

when things was at a low ebb with us, last autumn, missis pockets her pride, and begins to teach the pianor—which she has a great talent for music, folks say—and I think that little 'un, Archie, will have it too, if it goes by noise : hark at the rattle he's a-making."

Hester listened, and laughed.

" Well, ma'am, Mrs. Zink and Miss Fanny goes on at her as if it was a crime. But missis is wiser than to give in to 'em : the money's too useful. She has six pupils, and they pays her a pound a quarter apiece, which makes four-and-twenty pound in the year. If it hadn't been for that, ma'am, I don't think they could have kept me on this winter. Though I stops for a'most nothing : just a pair of shoes now and then, for I can't go barefoot."

" Then your mistress does do something, Betty, to aid matters ?"

“ She does her share, what with one thing and another ; she ain’t idle. There’s the making new things for the children, when they gets any ; and the patching of the old, which never fails, for one must turn ’em out decent to church on a Sunday, a little like gentlefolk’s children ; and the ironing the fine things, which is above my rough hands ; and the pies, which is above ’em too ; and the giving these pianor lessons ; and the nursing Davy and little Archie, who both cries to be took up, and I have not always got the time ; besides her visits round the parish. What with it all, missis don’t sit upon a bed of lavender, with folded hands, and do nothing but enjoy the smell. My heart !” added Betty, in a different tone, “ if here ain’t Mrs. Zink !”

She went away to open the door, and Mrs. Zink entered with her daughter Fanny. Both were thinner, and Mrs. Zink had taken

to wearing false hair ; but otherwise they were little altered.

“ Mrs. Halliwell has just stepped out,” said Hester, when they had sat down.

“ Ah !” grunted Mrs. Zink, “ she has turned herself into a professional. What do you think of her so disgracing her family ? I never heard of such a lowering proceeding for a clergyman’s wife.”

“ Money is so much wanted here,” rejoined Hester.

“ You need not tell me that,” retorted Mrs. Zink ; “ you don’t know it as well as I do. I should just think money is wanted.”

“ What a lesson this house ought to be to us against getting married !” ejaculated Fanny Zink, lifting her eyes and hands.

“ Yes,” answered Hester, “ unless we see our future more clearly before us than Alfred and Mabel did. I don’t wonder at Mrs.

Halliwell's giving music lessons. She does it from a praiseworthy motive."

"I don't know about the motive," wrathfully interrupted Mrs. Zink. "She ought to know better. If it were Fanny, now, who gave a little private instruction, it might be excused. Young—that is, unmarried—ladies often do such things for the sake of pocket-money. But Mabel is a clergyman's wife, and bound to keep up her dignity. As to her husband's permitting it, I cannot find words to express my indignation. He deserves to be tarred and feathered, as they serve the missionaries in those heathen settlements."

"Here he comes," remarked Hester, seeing her brother's approach from the window.

"Then, Fanny, we will go," said Mrs. Zink, rising hastily. "I don't care to come across him, Miss Halliwell, when my temper's up. One gets no satisfaction reproaching

him ; and it puts me out of sorts for the rest of the day. Let me reproach him as I will, he keeps on that provoking meekness — wanting to reason, instead of quarrel. If I struck him, I expect it would be all the same. I never saw such an insensible man.”

“ Oh no, Mrs. Zink, you are mistaken,” replied Hester. “ Mr. Halliwell is not insensible.”

“ Then he carries his ‘ Christian feeling,’ as some folk call it, very far. Into affectation, and nothing less. You must come and drink tea with us one of these first afternoons, my dear.”

“ Thank you. If I have time. I shall not be here long.”

“ Ah ! one has nothing but trouble in this world. There’s Amy must come home now, for she has no other left. Good-day, my dear.”

Mr. Halliwell came in, shivering and

looking blue. "It is very cold, Hester," he remarked, as he leaned over the fire. "And the church felt so damp to-day."

"Had you anything to do? Any christenings or churchings?"

"No. I generally stop there the hour for nothing. The poor like to choose Sunday : it is there leisure day ; and other people always give me notice."

"How is it, Alfred, you have three full services on the Sunday now ? as I hear you have," she inquired. "You used to hold them only morning and evening."

"Yes ; but one cannot please everybody. A few people wanted the evening service changed to the afternoon, but most of the parishioners were against it, and the malcontents appealed to the Bishop of Chelsbro'. He decided that, according to the rubric, it must be held in the afternoon, and he gave me the orders accordingly. But I was un-

willing to forego the evening service ; I thought I ought not : it is always so fully attended ; so I kept it on. In the afternoon we never muster more than forty or fifty ; people don't like coming out immediately after their dinner."

"How tired you must be when Sunday night comes!"

"Tolerably exhausted. Sometimes I feel as if I could go to bed and never get up again."

"Alfred, yours is a hard life."

"Do not set me against it," he returned ; and his tones were, for the transient moment, so impassioned that, had Mrs. Zink heard it, she never, hereafter, would have accused him of want of feeling. "I know that it must be good for me, or it would not be inflicted : and I know that I am being borne up in it, for, of my own strength, I never could *do* and *go through*. When a repining

spirit steals over me, I compare my condition with that of others less fortunate than myself: there are numbers so, even of my own calling. There is a poor curate in a rural parish — Camley, three miles off — a most deserving man. He has only seventy pounds a-year, a wife, a mother, and eight young children, all to be supported out of it: and he is expected, out of this, to give away to the poor, as I have to do. I have seen him on a week-day with scarcely a bit of shoe to his feet. Hester, when I feel inclined to murmur, I think of him, and am thankful.”

He was preparing to leave the room to hear the children's lessons—not that many could have been learnt, from the outrageous noise they had kept up—when Betty burst into it, nearly running against him. “Master! master!” she exclaimed, “here's Mr. Cockburn's footman without his hat, and all his hair standing on end. He says his master's

took in a fit, and Mrs. Cockburn says will you go up?"

Mr. Halliwell hastened out, and Hester was again alone. At one o'clock Mrs. Halliwell came in.

"They are saying in the town that Mr. Cockburn is dead," she exclaimed. "How fearfully sudden!"

"And like enough it is so," added Betty, "for St. Paul's bell is a-tolling out."

All doubt was over when the vicar returned. Mr. Cockburn had been found on the floor of his study in a fit of apoplexy. Remedies failed to arouse him, and in a short time he was quite gone.

"Oh, Hester!" murmured her brother, deeply affected, "I have envied him in life. But better toil on, as I do, than be surprised, thus suddenly, in my ease, and taken before my Maker, perhaps unprepared."



CHAPTER IX.

A SECRET BARGAIN.

A FEELING arose in Chelson in favour of Mr. Halliwell, that he might have the vacant living ; and a petition was got up, unknown to him, praying for it. His own parishioners said they should be grieved to lose him, but would support it for his own sake. After a few days it came to their vicar's ears. He would not allow himself to hope, or dwell upon the change of prospect, and shook his head at the bare notion of being suddenly exalted to fourteen hundred a year. " I might grow proud," he said ; " I might forget to

be humble ; though it would be welcome for the sake of educating my children."

Not so said Mabel. She was in high spirits, and lost herself in momentary visions of having already effected the desired change. "The rectory is such a capital house, Hester," she would say ; "and, oh, what a blessed relief it will be from our life of labour ! Whatever shall we do with old Betty ? She would be out of place there. Pension her off ?"

"Make her major-domo over the rest," laughed Hester.

It was Mr. Halliwell who buried the deceased rector. The curate of St. Paul's was the Reverend George Dewisson, a young man very unpopular in the parish. He was a brother of that Miss Dewisson who had formerly set her cap so strenuously at Alfred Halliwell. When a suggestion was made that perhaps he, George Dewisson,

might be the newly-appointed rector, Chelson was up in arms. He was an austere man of uncertain temper, never cordial with anyone and harsh to the poor, a bad reader, and it was well known that he bought his sermons. St. Paul's protested it would not have him; it had had quite enough of him as curate.

"Are you acquainted with the gentleman who has the living in his gift," inquired Hester of her brother—"this Mr. Burnley?"

"Mr. Burnley is only the steward," he replied. "The living is in the gift of the Earl of Seaford."

The Earl of Seaford! Hester was thunderstruck at the answer. With reference to the living, she had never heard any name mentioned but Mr. Burnley's.

"I had no idea the Seafords possessed property in this part of the country," she said, almost doubting the information.

"The Earl bought it some time ago from

Lord Westnor, who ruined himself gambling, and joined his son in cutting off the entail. I should think ill-luck goes with the property," added Mr. Halliwell; "for Lord Seaford, they say, will be obliged to sell it again. His sons have all turned out wild; but Lord Sale the most so. He has drained and nearly ruined his father."

"Is Lord Seaford ever here?"

"He is here now—so I heard yesterday; but he lives chiefly abroad. Too poor, now, to live in England."

Hester Halliwell was not given to wild schemes, but one was coming into her brain then. That she would find her way to Lord Seaford, recall herself to his recollection, and boldly ask him to give the living to her brother: ask for it *in recompense*, if other persuasions failed, for the injury inflicted on her by the Lady Georgina. Aye, in such a cause, she would not mind telling him that.

“Alfred,” she said, “do you know what I am thinking of? That I will go to Lord Seaford, and ask him to give you the living.”

“Well done, Hester!” returned Mr. Halliwell, the ingenuous colour flushing his pale cheeks at the words. “What presumptuous thing will you do next?”

“If the worst comes to the worst, and I get a refusal, you will only be where you are now. I can urge the wishes of Chelson as a plea for my request.”

The following day found Hester at Hawsford, the Earl’s seat. She had engaged a fly to take her, for it was six miles off; and she went driving up to the principal entrance. They were some time answering the man’s summons, and then the door was unlocked and unbarred.

“Curious they should lock up the house,” thought Hester, “if the Earl is here.”

A woman appeared, looking like a house-

keeper. "I wish to see Lord Seaford," said Hester.

"His lordship is gone, ma'am. He left late last night."

There was a disappointment! All the expense of the fly for nothing!

"But if it is any business, ma'am, his steward, Mr. Burnley, lives in the village close by. My lord leaves most things to him."

As Hester was there, she thought she might as well see the steward, though she could not urge the matter upon him as she would have done on Lord Seaford. Mr. Burnley's house was the only good house in the village, so far as she saw; and she was handed into the office. It was one of two rooms opening into each other, with a separate door to each leading into the passage of the house. It was the back room that she was shown into; and Mr. Burnley,

a man of gentlemanly manners, went to her from the front one, through the intervening door, which he pushed to but did not close.

He was very polite. Regretted his inability to comply with her request, for he respected much the merits of the Rev. Mr. Halliwell. Lord Seaford had received the petition in his favour most graciously, and would have been delighted to comply with its prayer had the living not been promised.

"Is it really promised?" asked Hester wistfully.

"I may say it is given," replied Mr. Burnley. "The new rector will be announced to-morrow."

Of course there was no more to be urged, and Hester left the room. Mr. Burnley followed, to attend her to the door, but a young man encountered them in the passage, apparently in a pressing hurry, seized Mr. Burnley by the button-hole, and took him

back into the room. So Hester said "Good-day," and went on alone. At that very moment the street-door was pushed open, and, scraping his shoes on the scraper outside, she saw old Mr. Dewisson, the father of the late Mr. Cockburn's curate. He was a lawyer and electioneering agent in Chelson, seventy years of age, but as active as a boy, with a rosy, clear complexion, and snow-white hair. Hester did not care that he should see her, and go back and tell Chelson that she had been personally soliciting for her brother—and her business he would not fail to guess—so, on the impulse of the moment, she glided in at the open door of the front office, until he should have passed.

She heard him enter and wipe his shoes upon the mat, and she then heard the young man come out of the back office, and leave the house. Mr. Burnley also came out of it, and shook hands with Mr. Dewisson in

the passage. "I have been expecting you this hour," he said.

"Better late than never," answered the old lawyer. "I had some business to attend to before I could get away. The Earl left last night, I suppose?"

"Yes. He is ploughing the waves to France by this time, if he could catch the morning's mail-train to Dover. Walk in."

To Hester's great horror—which is as fresh upon her now as it felt then—the door she had just slipped in at was pulled sharply to, of course by Mr. Burnley, and the key turned in it. So she was locked in. What to do she did not know. She looked at the window, and had a momentary thought of getting out of it, but found that she would have pitched upon spikes. Next came a wild idea of trying the chimney; but even if she reached the top and the roof, how was she to get down? So she had to remain where

she was, trusting to chance, and to someone unlocking the door, and sat shaking behind the door. As to going brazenly into the back office and avowing herself to Mr. Burnley in the face of old Dewisson, she would rather have risked the spikes.

She did not hear what was said at first in the next room, and tried not to hear the rest, but there was no avoiding it; for the voices, lowered in the commencement to the confidential tones associated with the telling of state secrets, were gradually raised.

“How much do you say is to be kept back?” were the first distinct words, in Mr. Dewisson’s voice.

“A thousand,” answered Mr. Burnley.

“Which will leave my son four hundred a year. That’s less than I suggested. There’s nothing very great about that.”

“But there is about fourteen hundred.

Under any circumstances but these he might whistle for so rich a living. You know, Dewisson, that you have no interest to get him one of half the value. He might starve out his life upon a pittance, as poor Halliwell does. You are aware of the petition that came in ?”

“ Aware of it ! Chelson’s full of it. Thinks it s going to succeed. I say, Burnley, though, the Earl’s is not a bad life.”

“ He is sixty-six, and knows something of dissipation still. He may fill his years, three-score-and-ten ; he will not go much beyond them. And then your son comes into the full income.”

“ And then George comes into the full income,” slowly repeated Mr. Dewisson. “ Well, it is a good day’s work for both the Earl and him : each gets his turn served. But I say, Burnley, what will the parish think of George ? They’ll call him a miser.

Holding a living of fourteen hundred a-year, and living up to four of it !”

“ Oh—he gives the surplus to the poor, you know.”

They both laughed, and Hester thought, by the sound, seemed to be rising. She shook excessively as they came along the passage.

“ Burnley,” cried Mr. Dewisson, in passing the door, “ we must meet to celebrate this : when will you come and dine ?”

She did not hear the answer ; they had reached the front door then, and the sound of the voices escaped. Mr. Burnley returned, and unlocked the door as he passed and unlatched it. Hester squeezed herself up to nothing, in her terror, and her heart stood still.

He did not go in : she is thankful for it yet : but went on to the back office, and shut himself in. Not another moment

waited Hester. She twisted herself into the passage, noiselessly opened the front door, and flew down the street towards the inn where the flyman was baiting his horse, as if a ghost had been after her. Mr. Dewisson and his gig were already at a distance.

Now the reader may be in doubt whether this incident really occurred to Hester Halliwell. *It did*: the conversation has been related word for word as it is given; and George Dewisson still holds his rich living.

Hester had leisure to think over what she had been a witness to as she drove back to Chelson; and, to her, the bargain appeared to be a sinful one. When the fly stopped at its destination, Mrs. Halliwell's face, full of joyous hope, appeared above the window-blind, and the children came dancing out. Her brother looked up from his warm arm-chair when she went in.

“Hester!” cried Mabel, in her hasty way, “you don’t speak.”

“Perhaps I had better not speak: for I have only bad news to give you.”

“Let us know the worst at once,” she cried. “We must know it shortly, anyway.”

“The Earl has quitted Hawsford. He left last night for France, and the living is given away.”

“Given!”

“Yes. I saw the steward.”

“To whom?” asked her brother.

“He did not say,” was Hester’s answer. For not even to him would she breathe a hint of the dishonourable secret she had (so to say) dishonourably heard. “But not to you.”

Mabel sank down on a chair, poor thing, and despair, if ever Hester saw it, settled itself on her face. She had buoyed up her

hopes unreasonably. "Toil! and trouble! and illness! and heart-burning! and care!" she murmured. "Must it go on with us for ever?"

Her husband's countenance had fallen, and a red spot, the symbol of raised expectancy, shone on his cheek, proving that he *had* hoped for success. For one moment he bowed his head upon his hands; the next, he rose and spoke, his voice calm as usual, and his face pale again:

"It is the will of God, Mabel, that we should still bear our cross. Let us welcome it."

"If such a meek-spirited temper is not enough to try the patience of Job!" impetuously responded Mrs. Halliwell.

The following day the new rector was announced—the Reverend George Dewison. St. Paul's rebelled, so far as words could go; but there was no remedy, and they had to sit down and put up with him. Amy

Zink came to tea that evening, the last of Hester's stay. The old aunt was dead, so Amy had returned to her mother's. Hester looked at her with interest : a meek, gentle-spirited creature, who seemed, as Mabel afterwards expressed it, to have been "kept under."

"Amy," her sister said to her, "it is a great shame old aunt left you nothing."

"She gave me fifty pounds the day before she died," responded Amy. "For mourning, she said. Of course I have not spent it. I made some old do, and I gave the money to mamma."

"To mamma ! Then you'll never see it again," cried Mabel. "I should have put it in my pocket. Aunt ought to have left you a sufficient income."

"She said her nephew Braybrook had more claim than I."

"That's nonsense," returned Mabel. "He

can't have. You have worn out your best years, bearing with her fractiousness. You don't know how necessary money is."

"I think I do," answered Amy. "Mamma has been asking me, ever since I came home, how I am to be kept."

"And she'll ask you that every day of your life, Amy ; so prepare for it. I wish I could afford to have you here, you would be so useful."

It happened that Hester went upstairs in the course of the evening to fetch something wanted for the children. She was looking for it when a timid, humble voice was heard behind her. "If you please, Miss Halliwell, may I speak to you?"

"Is it you, Amy? Yes, of course. What is it?"

"I do not think that I ought to remain at home," said Amy, with a very vivid blush. "Mamma says everything is so dear, and—

and—I don't like to hear her say it. It does make me feel so uncomfortable."

"Yes?" rejoined Hester.

"I was thinking that perhaps you might want a teacher in your school: or might know of some other school wanting one. I should be so thankful to come to you. Indeed, I would not presume upon Mabel's being related to you, in the way of expecting to sit with you after school hours. I would be quite humble, and be content to be the lowest of all your teachers, and sit by myself without fire—or anything. If you could only try me!"

Hester wondered. Had she been used to "sitting without fire"? "We are not in want of a teacher just now," she answered, in kindly tones; "our vacancies are all filled. Are you"—she spoke hesitatingly—"qualified for a teacher?"

"I am a thorough English scholar," returned Amy; "I understand the globes,

and am a good arithmetician ; but I cannot play on any instrument. Aunt said she knew I should be stupid at it, and she did not let me learn. I can teach everything in sewing, plain work and fancy work, and I could be useful in the kitchen if you wanted me, especially in cooking for the sick. I can draw a little : my aunt let me learn for a year when I was fifteen."

Hester smiled. " You would have patience with young children, I should think ?"

" Indeed, yes," replied Amy. " I have much patience naturally, and living with my aunt has given me more, for she was extremely irritable. No one else would stay with her—not a servant ; they would not come near the room. I would strive to do my very best, Miss Halliwell. And I would not ask for any salary : not for a year or two, until my clothes begin to wear out. I have a good wardrobe at present."

“ I will bear you in remembrance, Amy,” was Hester’s promise. And she did so.

Hester returned home, and the school duties went on as usual at Halliwell House. It was a flourishing establishment now ; at least, sufficiently so to remove anxiety and obviate the necessity of letting their drawing-room. Not long after this period they were to receive a surprise—no less than a visit from Mrs. Pepper. She arrived at their house with two children : Jessie, an infant, and Thomas, a lad some years older. Of Mrs. Pepper’s large family these were all that remained. Several had died older than Thomas, and some between him and his sister. Two servants attended her : a man and a coloured nurse. She was strangely altered ! not the slightest trace remained of the young and pretty Jane Halliwell. Hester would look at her by the hour, and be unable

to trace a single feature. She was in an extremely precarious state of health, and a conviction stole over Hester that she had only come home to die.

Tom was the romp of the schoolroom, and was always escaping bounds and rushing into it, to the excessive delight of the young ladies. He was a round-faced, chubby urchin, wonderfully demure before his mamma and aunts, but a very demon of mischief elsewhere.

"Jane, you ought to have come home years ago," exclaimed Hester to her sister. "It was really wicked of you so to neglect yourself."

"I did so dread the voyage alone, and Major Pepper never could obtain leave. He is a very useful officer."

"You must stay at least two years, now you are here, to get up your strength at all."

"Not two years. I shall limit my stay to

half the time. And I shall have much on my hands. First I must look for a superior, comfortable school for Tom. Then there will be all the visits. You came first, you see, which was natural ; and there will be Alfred and Mary, and the Major's relatives. He has so many, and they are so scattered. Some in London, some in Yorkshire, and in other places ; all want a visit from me. I think I shall go to Mary next to you. I long to see her. Hers is a very happy marriage, is it not ?”

“ Very. Dr. Goring is a delightful man, and a fond husband. You and Mary have been fortunate in that respect. Nice children, too, are Mary's.”

“ And their circumstances are easy ?”

“ Quite so. Dr. Goring's practice is good, and then Mary has her annuity of three hundred a-year. We wrote you word about it, you know.”

“Yes. It was a lucky thing. You and Lucy are doing well too, Hester?”

“Now we are ; but, Jane, you don’t know what a struggle and anxiety it has been. Alfred is the worst off. I wish something could be done to aid him.”

“I wonder whether the Major has no interest with any people who have livings to bestow?” said Mrs. Pepper. “I must talk the matter over with Alfred, and see about it when I get back to India.”

Mrs. Pepper, poor lady, never lived to see her brother, or to go back. When her visit terminated at Halliwell House, she went to stay with some of her husband’s relatives at Clapham—Mr. Pepper, an old bachelor and banker in the City, and his half-sister, Miss Oldstage. From them she purposed going to Middlebury, to Mrs. Goring’s, but, alas! she was taken worse at Mr. Pepper’s. Her disorder, which was really nothing but weak-

ness, assumed suddenly a more alarming phase ; Hester and Lucy hastened to her, and in a few days, before her relatives and friends could believe it, she had sunk into death.

These were sad tidings to write to her husband : they were sad tidings for all. What would be done with her children ? was the exclamation of more than one. But about that arose little embarrassment, for means were abundant : the young boy was placed at school, and Miss Oldstage undertook to bring up the infant girl.





CHAPTER X.

AT MIDDLEBURY.

SEVERAL years again passed, and we need take no particular note of them; for they were pregnant with little of moment to the branches of the Halliwell family: afterwards, events came crowding thick and fast. Hester was now getting to be a woman nearer fifty than forty, those who were boys and girls were growing into men and women, and little children to boys and girls.

A tragical event, full of mystery and suspicion, occurred about this time in Dr. Goring's family. It will be better (as we

have done once before) to let Hester relate it in her own words.

I did not often go down to Middlebury : about once in every three or four years. Dr. Goring (he was not “ Dr.” Goring : only “ Matthew Goring, surgeon and apothecary ;” but the townsfolk in Middlebury would style him “ Dr.,” as is the case sometimes in country places) and Mary had been married about sixteen years, when she had a dangerous illness, and, as it was our midsummer holidays and leisure time with me, I went to Middlebury. They had then six children (without counting the infant who had just died), Mary, the eldest, a gentle, good girl of fifteen, just like her mother. I found my sister ill indeed, and for the first fortnight I did little but watch by her bedside.

Now, I am apt to take likes and dislikes when I meet with strangers for the first time.

People say it is prejudice, so I suppose it is ; but it is a prejudice sometimes for, and sometimes against. And I may mention, in defence of this "prejudice" (which I can no more keep from me than I can keep the moon from shining on my house), that I never yet found the instinct mislead me. There was a governess when I went down to Dr. Goring's this time, a Miss Howard. She was sufficiently good-looking, with a colourless face and a very subdued tone and manner of speaking, so remarkably gentle as to impart the idea (to me, at least) that it was more assumed than genuine. I took a strange antipathy to this lady when I first saw her ; and though she appeared willing to be on friendly terms with me, the instinct I have spoken of never warned me more strongly against anyone. She was about five-and-thirty, but she dressed herself to look younger.

I sat one afternoon in my sister's room thinking over the observations I had made during my fortnight's stay. I did not like them all. I saw my relatives were living in an extravagant style, which no income—such as theirs—could possibly justify ; and I felt sure that that governess was scheming to attract Matthew Goring towards her. *He*, upon the slightest inducement, was ever ready to flirt : and Middlebury knew it. He was a universal favourite, especially with the ladies : gentlemanly, generous, and affable ; but he was too fond of talking nonsense, though a kind and affectionate husband.

“What made you think of taking a governess into the house, Mary ?” I suddenly asked, letting my work drop in my lap.

“We did it by way of economy,” was Mrs. Goring's reply. “The school bills of the two girls were frightfully heavy, and little Jane is coming on now.”

"I would have retrenched home expenses, Mary, and have kept the children at school. Your rate of living is enormously extravagant."

"It really is. But we have somehow fallen into this style of housekeeping, and Matthew would not like to retrench. I fear, though he will not acknowledge it to me, that we are living beyond our income. And if I had died during this illness, as was too likely at one period of it, my annuity would have been lost to him."

"Three hundred a-year is a heavy sum to lose in a family," I remarked.

"It is not so much as that," she quickly replied. "The insurance takes up—I forget exactly what, but I think more than a hundred of it."

"What insurance?" I said.

"I insured my life some years ago. Did I never tell you about it? I should think I did."

But she had not. I never heard of it until then.

“It was after a very bad illness, when Jane was born,” my sister went on. “They thought I should lose my life, and so did I think it. And whilst I lay here, getting better, it occurred to me that though I could not continue the annuity to my children I might insure my life with part of it, and thus secure them something. So I insured it for three thousand pounds.”

“I am very glad to hear it,” I said. “Your husband ought to insure his.”

“He has often talked of it, but has never been able to spare the money. We live quite up to our income, Hester ; or beyond it.”

“Which is the height of imprudence. Suppose you were both—suppose anything were to happen to you both ; there would be absolutely nothing for the children but this three thousand pounds.”

“Nothing. Excepting the furniture and any book debts.”

“Six children, and only three thousand pounds!” I mused; “what would become of them?” And I put on my considering cap again, and began to work out an idea which had been haunting me for some days. “Mary,” I said after awhile, “suppose I relieve you of one of the girls—Mary, if you can spare her—and take her to London with me, and finish her education free of expense to you; could you not put the other two to school, discharge the governess, and retrench your home expenses? You might retrench them, it seems to me, by one half, and yet live in sufficiently good style.”

“I am quite willing to retrench, if you can bring Matthew into the same mind,” said Mrs. Goring. “But do you believe it would be greater economy to place even two children at school than to keep a governess?”

“Yes, I do,” was my decided answer. “If I am to help in this matter at all, Mary, Miss Howard must leave.”

I suppose I spoke too pointedly, and so overshot my mark, for Mary looked at me, and a warm flush came into her face.

“Hester! you do not like Miss Howard?”

“She may be a good instructress,” I coldly answered, “but, in my opinion, she is not altogether a desirable person to retain in your house, the guide and companion of Mary.”

“I see what you think,” cried my sister, nervously throwing one arm out of bed; “you think she is too familiar with my husband.”

“Her manners are certainly not what I approve, Mary.”

“But you know that Matthew talks and laughs with everyone,” again said Mrs. Goring. “And some young women are vain enough to mistake that for pointed attentions.”

“There is not much harm in laughing and talking, when it’s confined to that,” I growled, feeling angry with Matthew, in my heart ; “but his children’s governess should be an exception, even from this.”

“So I told him,” said my sister, “for I did remonstrate with him, one day, about it. In the drawing-room, in my presence, he will pay her more attention than he does me ; at the dinner-table the same : once, in coming home late at night, he gave her his arm, and left me to walk with Mary.”

“Then she ought not to have taken it,” I interrupted. “No right-minded woman would have done so.”

“And he seems to talk to her about all sorts of confidential things, often in a whisper : family matters, money matters, which ought to be conversed on only with me. I believe, too, they go out walking together, or, rather, join each other when they get outside the

town, which is very bad on Miss Howard's part. But it is not so much the bare fact of all this that I dislike, as ——"

"As what?" I asked, finding Mary hesitate.

"Their manners to each other—though I scarcely know how to express what I mean. They are more considerate, more tender; implying, seemingly, a mutual understanding between themselves and against me. But I must do my husband the justice to say that I believe he never would have thought of all this, but for her first advances to him. I saw them, quiet and covert as they were."

"And seeing this, noting this, you have kept and can still keep that woman in your house!" I uttered.

"Hester, at times I have been on the very point of discharging her, but then the thought has occurred to me that it may be all nothing, that Matthew's attractive manners may be

alone in fault, and that I may be depriving the children of a good instructress (which she certainly is) through an absurd, jealous chimera. When I spoke to Matthew, as I told you, he only laughed at me, and wondered how I could be so very ridiculous. So I dropped the subject, thinking I was, perhaps, ridiculous. But, has the idea struck you, Hester, during your short stay, that there is too good an understanding between her and my husband?"

"Oh, I don't say so much that," I evasively replied, finding she was more alive to the affair than I had suspected. "Your husband's manners are very free, though they generally mean nothing."

"If I thought there was anything wrong between them," murmured my poor sister—"I do not mean really wrong," she added, interrupting herself; "of course I do not, and could not suspect that; but if I thought

there was any positive attachment—that he loved her as he once loved me—I think it would kill me. I have lain here, when I was at the worst, conjuring up a picture—myself gone and forgotten, and *she* the second mother of my children.”

“Now, Mary, you are going from one extreme to the other,” I remonstrated. But what more I would have said was interrupted by the entrance of the sick-nurse, Mrs. Gill, who came to take my place; and I went downstairs to find my brother-in-law.

I had heard him come in, not long before, and supposed I should find him in the surgery. This surgery had two entrances to it: one leading from the passage, just past the door of the dining-room; the other from the garden at the back of the house. The passage door, by which I was about to enter, was pushed to, but not closed; and as I was going to push it open, I heard the

voice of Miss Howard inside. I have, all my life, endeavoured to be honourable in my actions, and I hope I have shunned everything mean; but I thought it my duty to listen then.

“I shall soon become a chemist if you bestow these pains upon me,” she was saying, with her soft insinuating accents, false as she was. “And what is this?”

“Oh, that’s a very common-place article,” responded the merry voice of my brother-in-law, “that’s castor-oil.”

“Oh dear! And this?”

“That’s more common still. It is distilled water.”

“That little bottle, up there, labelled ‘Poison’—it is always kept by itself in that same place, I observe—is it prussic acid?”

“No; but a poison quite as deadly. It is a preparation of strychnia.”

“How is it administered?”

“A very minute portion, taken in water, would destroy life. Shall I try it upon yours?”

“*Would* you?” she murmured, with an affectation of submissive tenderness. “I will give you leave to do so if you wish.”

“My darling girl,” he replied, “you know I would rather try it on my own.”

Then came a silence, and I pushed open the door: but may I never speak truth again, if I did not first hear a sound like a kiss. Matthew Goring had Miss Howard’s hand in his, and was whispering to her, while she stood there quietly beside him, her hand passively resting in his, her countenance as well as her eyes being cast down in a passive attitude of listening. It was evident that, if he was ready to court, she was more than willing to be courted. On his side—I believe so, even now—it was probably only the passing amusement of an idle moment:

her conduct wore an aspect far deeper and more reprehensible. I have asked myself, since, whether I was blinded by prejudice, or partiality, in thus judging her to be worse than he, and I cannot bring myself to think so. What business had she out of her own proper place, the school or drawing room? What business had she to go hunting after him to his professional apartments, with her wicked excuse of wanting to learn chemistry, and her soft voice, subdued to child-like innocence?

I think we all looked rather foolish. The governess drew her hand away, and was the first to break the silence, which she did with the utmost equanimity.

“ Dr. Goring is willing to give me a little insight into the matter of drugs and chemistry,” she began, “ so I endeavour, in my few leisure moments, to profit by his kindness. A woman, as instructress of youth,

cannot know too much : do you think she can, Miss Halliwell ?”

“ I think a woman may acquire an insight into things entirely unfitted for her, unless she takes care what she is about,” I answered, quite angrily. “ A knowledge of drugs is not necessary for the instruction of Dr. Goring’s daughters.”

She said no more to me, but turned and thanked him, in a modest, retiring tone, perfectly charming—to anyone who had not seen her with her hand lying in his, and heard his kiss upon her lips.

“ Matthew,” I sharply said, as she hurried away, for I felt terribly cross, “ all this must be put an end to.”

“ What must be put an end to ?” he inquired, busying himself with his tubes and chemical glasses, the uses of which he had probably been explaining to her, and whistling with unconcern.

“More things than one,” I answered. “This familiarity with your daughters’ governess is growing beyond a joke, and——”

“You surely do not look upon that nonsense as serious?” he interrupted, holding a glass cylinder between his eye and the light to see that it was clean.

“I don’t know what you call ‘serious,’” I indignantly said. “I heard you kiss her.”

“Now, Hester,” he remonstrated, laughing provokingly all the while, “you have not lived to these years without knowing that we men like to snatch a kiss from a pretty girl under the rose.”

“Girl! pretty!” I ejaculated. “*She’s* not much of either.”

“An attractive woman, then; how you snap one up, Hester! And no disloyalty to our wives, either.”

“Your behaviour to Miss Howard, and

especially hers to you, is unbecoming in itself and a disgrace to both of you, when carried on in the sight of your wife and daughters," I persisted. "I say nothing of my sister: that she feels this deeply I have discovered to-day; but her retiring, generous disposition induces her to bear in silence what few wives would do. But your daughter! Mary is of an age to see and understand these things. Miss Howard must leave."

"I'm sure I don't care whether she leaves or not," responded the gentleman, with the most apparent unconcern. "But who the deuce is to take care of the children, if you send her away, and Mary ill in bed?"

"That is quite a secondary consideration," I remarked. "Have I your permission to discharge Miss Howard?"

"Well, I don't know. It will look absurdly strange: and so unnecessary. You do her great injustice, Hester, and me too, if

you think there's anything wrong. What do you suppose I care for Miss Howard?"

"That you 'care' for her to any extent, I do not fear," I replied, "for when a woman, be she young or getting on in life, so far forgets herself as to step between man and wife—to endeavour to worm herself clandestinely into his affections—all respect for that woman leaves his mind; and though he may frequent her society for the amusement of the hour, that woman has lost, for him, her greatest charm."

"Egad, you are right there, Hester!" cried Dr. Goring. "When a single woman lapses into a flirtation with a married man, and takes pains to conceal it from the world and the wife, we set her down as a silly fool, who might become something worse if she were tempted."

"Just so. They suit you for amusement, but they are not such as you would place in

your home and at your hearth. Many a married man has his 'amusement' in this way, and will have it, I suppose: but whoever is placed about your wife and children, be it friend, governess, or servant, should be made an exception to your rule of admiration."

"I declare I don't much admire Miss Howard," he laughed. "I think the admiration is mostly on her side."

"I think it is," I answered dryly. "And that ought to have rendered it the more incumbent on you to discourage it."

Was his indifference put on? I have often wondered, since.

"And now to something else that must be put a stop to," I continued. "I told you, Matthew, there were more things than one."

"To my chemical experiments?" he asked, by way of mocking me.

“To your home extravagance. Mary says you are putting-by nothing out of your income.”

“Putting-by! I should think not. The boot’s on the other leg.”

“Yet you must be in the receipt of eight or nine hundred a year.”

“Not much less, besides Mary’s money. But look at the expenses, Hester: the servants, the horses, the carriage, the visiting, the children! Matthew’s school-bill, for last year, was nearly a hundred and twenty pounds.”

“You should not send him to so expensive a one. You might live upon five hundred a year, and put by the rest.”

“We ‘might’ live upon two hundred, I suppose, if we were driven to it. But I must keep up my position in the town; and that cannot be done with less than I spend.”

“Yes it can,” I earnestly added. “You

do not need the carriage, you do not need so many servants, and you do not need to give your extravagant dinner and evening parties. I am going to run away with Mary, and see what sort of a woman I can turn her out. I will promise you that she shall not be a second Miss Howard. The other two girls you can put to school. If I were mistress here, Matthew, I know I could diminish your expenses one-half, and only lop off superfluities—no comforts, no essentials.”

“I wish to goodness you could, then,” he said, with a good-humoured but incredulous curl on his lip. “Our bills are confoundedly heavy, and I don’t always know where to pick up the money to meet them.”

He put on his hat as he spoke, for he had to attend a consultation, but I stopped him to say I should at once discharge Miss Howard.

“Well, if it must be so, it must,” was his

reply, standing still and looking at me. "But you cannot turn her out of the house as you would a dog—you don't mean that. She must have a month's notice."

"If she insists upon it," I grumbled to myself, as I went to look for the governess. But I felt that any woman with a spark of delicacy would prefer to leave at once, under the circumstances.

I entered into no particulars with Miss Howard ; I did not allude to the scene in the surgery, but I said that Dr. and Mrs. Goring had come to the resolution of making a change. They were about to place their daughters at school and had no further occasion for her services, and that she might leave at her earliest convenience.

"I cannot leave without my proper notice!" she exclaimed, turning as white as a sheet. "The agreement with Mrs. Goring was a month's notice on either side."

“Then I give it you now,” I said, and there I stopped and hesitated. But I thought it better to go on with what I was about to say. “May I suggest, Miss Howard, that for the month you insist upon remaining here, your manners to Dr. Goring may be characterized by more reserve and circumspection?”

“What do you mean?” she retorted.

“It would be superfluous to tell you, since you must well understand my meaning,” I replied. “But I may observe, for your future guidance, that if a young woman knew how entirely she forfeits respect when she lapses into undue intimacy with a married man, the respect, not only of the world, *but of him*, we should see less of this selfish and thoughtless conduct than we are compelled now to see. When an unmarried woman suffers herself to lapse into this discreditable intimacy, she stands little chance,

let me tell you, of ever becoming a married one."

"That probably is the cause of your being still single," she burst forth, sending a sneer at my advancing years.

"No, thank God," I fervently responded. "My principles and self-esteem have not yet sunk so low as to suffer me to step between man and wife. A woman, a single woman, who can stoop to flirt with a married man, to draw him to her side, regardless of the outrage to the feelings of his wife, is guilty of as great a crime as are those poor fallen creatures who set themselves out to lead men into guilt. And this opinion is Dr. Goring's as well as mine. Never you descend again to play yourself off upon a married man, Miss Howard; he will not thank you for it long."

She looked round the room with her livid face, livid with anger. I thought she was

looking for something to throw at me, and to avoid that, and any further unpleasantness, I quitted the room, reminding her that as that was the 1st of July, the day of her departure would be the 1st of August."

That same evening, after tea, I was sitting with Mrs. Goring, when my eldest niece came into the chamber.

"Mamma," she said, "Mrs. Stone and Emily have sent for me in, and I am to take my music. May I go?"

"Yes, if you like, Mary," replied my sister. "Where's Frances?"

"I think she is in the nursery, dressing Jane's doll."

"Then where's Miss Howard?"

"I don't know, mamma," was Mary's answer. "I saw her, after tea, in the garden with papa."

That was enough for me, and downstairs I went. "There shall be no private and

confidential interviews if I can help it," quoth I to myself. I went by way of the surgery : not because I wanted to steal into the garden by the more private way, but because I thought they might be at that excuse of their chemicals again. The surgery was empty. I thought the garden was, at first, but as I stood in the corner, just outside the little surgery door, I heard the sound of subdued voices in the summer-house. So I went up the narrow side-path, against the apricot wall, my feet almost treading on the straggling strawberry plants. And Miss Frances, by the way, was not in the nursery. I heard her laughing with the servants in the kitchen.

They did not see me come up : the door of the summer-house faced the other side-wall of the garden. The first words I was near enough to hear were from her.

"What right has she to come down and

make these changes, and interfere in your household? You must have the temper of an angel to put up with it."

"The truth is, my dear" (it was his voice now), "that, as I hinted to you, I am drained dry and ready to catch at straws. Mrs. Goring has no idea that my embarrassments are serious: but if we go on at our present rate of living, we shan't long go on at all. If we can retrench expenses, and so patch up matters, exposure may be avoided. Miss Halliwell's offer of taking Mary is a great help, now that the most expensive period of her education is coming on: but she does this only on condition that the others shall be put to school."

"She has taken a dislike to me," murmured the lady, in a sweetly plaintive tone. "Old maid's prejudices are unfathomable."

This was good from her, with her five-

and-thirty years ! I don't know what answer Matthew made. I heard none.

" You are a little in debt ?" she went on to ask.

" Jolly well deep in it," was his reply. " It would take many hundreds to set me free."

" Mrs. Goring has property, I have heard. Can you not make it available ?"

" Mrs. Goring's money is an annuity, and it dies with her."

" All of it ?"

" All. But her life is insured for three thousand pounds."

" What a help that would be to you ! It would free you, and doubly free you. What a good thing !"

" Why, you speak," laughed Matthew, " as if it were something coming to me to-morrow. My ever having it is the most remote contingency in the world. She may outlive me.

And, if not, Mrs. Goring intends that money to go to the children, not to pay off my extravagances."

There is always a little corner of thankfulness in my heart when I think of that sentence, and of Matthew's cheery, hearty expression when he gave utterance to it. It seems to repeat over to me that he was not the guilty man, the man with murder on his soul, that some have since deemed him.

"Mrs. Goring's life seems a precarious one," she went on to say: "she is always ailing. I am sure if the three thousand pounds you speak of should drop in, it will be your duty to make use of it. Your ease and comfort should be paramount to every other consideration."

I fear a feeling of positive hatred rose in my heart when I heard her thus make light of the life of my dear sister and his wife. I gave a great cough to let them know I was

there, and walked round to the front of the harbour.

She came out then, but not before I saw him draw his arm from round her waist, and she went towards the house.

“Where is Miss Frances?” I said to her.

“With her sister,” replied Miss Howard.

“She is in the kitchen with the servants,” I retorted. “And I apprehend Mrs. Goring would not approve of her making them her companions.”

I said no more. If I had, I might have said too much ; and I resolutely bit my lip to impose self-silence. My gentleman had sauntered off towards the vegetables.

I did not see much, after that, during my stay. To be sure, I was out a good deal then, calling on old friends, and sometimes spending the evening, so that those two, if they wished, may have found opportunities

of being together without my knowing it. My sister was improving in health, and sat up for several hours each day, but she did not yet leave her room.





CHAPTER XI.

“DIED FROM POISON.”

OUR own pupils were coming back to us the 10th of July : for we have never followed the bad custom of giving six or seven weeks' holiday : and on the 7th I returned home, there being several household matters I wished to arrange before they came. I took Frances with me—Mrs. Goring, in her weak, nervous state, seemed unwilling to part with Mary, who could now make herself useful in many ways—and quitted Middlebury early in the morning, reaching London and home the same evening.

I was up betimes the next day : I am always an early riser : but we breakfasted later than usual, for at eight o'clock Frances was still sleeping. We would not begin without her, and yet did not like to disturb her, for she was tired, poor child, with her journey, so that it was past nine when we sat down to breakfast.

I was pouring out the second cups of tea, when the postman's knock was heard at the door, and our cook—the other servants being at that hour engaged in their upstairs duties—came in with a letter.

"Twopence, ma'am," said the cook.

"Twopence !" I answered, diving into my pocket ; "who can have sent a letter unpaid ?"

"It is to ask for a prospectus, no doubt," observed Lucy, who had taken the letter, while I paid cook. "But it has the Middlebury postmark !"

"It is Mary's writing, I am sure, Aunt Hester," observed the little girl; "and what a great sprawling seal she has put! She has been getting at papa's wax, too, for it is black."

I took the letter out of Lucy's hand, and a sort of unpleasant tremor came over me when I gazed on the black seal. Mary Goring, in her little notes to her young friends, was so fond of displaying her blue, scented wax. Why had she now used black?

I opened the letter: it was blotted, as if written and folded in haste, and but few words were in it. I ran my eye hastily over them, and screamed out. Had my life depended on my not screaming, I could not have helped myself, the shock was so terrible; though I have great command over my feelings in general: how else should I be fitted to train the young?

"Oh, come back to us, my dear Aunt Hester! Mamma is dead. And they say she is poisoned. Papa is crying dreadfully. Come directly.

"Your affectionate niece,

"MARY GORING."

Now were not those words enough to make me scream?

I went at once. I sent cook out for a cab, taking off my gingham dress and putting on my black silk one while she was gone, and my shawl and bonnet; and when she came back in it I was ready, and drove away to the Paddington railway-station. I left the letter with Lucy, but we did not tell Frances. I only said to her that her mamma was not so well. Girls of twelve are easily satisfied.

I could not get off till the twelve o'clock train, and it was night when the Middlebury omnibus—which had to take me the

concluding miles of my journey—reached Middlebury. I trust I shall never again have to pass such a day as that. My suspense and anxiety were hard to bear. Sometimes I felt as if the railway train did not go quickly enough, and that I must rise from my seat and try to fly over the intervening distance; at others, it seemed as if nothing so horrible could have happened, and that Mary's letter must have been a dream. A gentleman in the same carriage offered me the *Times* to read. I took it, and held it before my eyes; but the letters seemed to swim, and when I did get to read a sentence, I could not understand it. So I thanked him, and put it down again.

I knocked when I reached my brother-in-law's; very softly, as became a house where death was. Susan opened the door—the housemaid: a neat, tidy girl. “Oh, ma'am! Oh, ma'am!” she exclaimed, putting up her

hands when she saw me. "But I am glad you are come."

"Is your mistress—alive?" I asked. I don't know why I should have said that; for surely no hope could have lurked within me, after the letter.

"Dear ma'am," she uttered, bursting into tears, "alive! she died yesterday afternoon. Master's in there," she added, gently opening the door of the dining-room.

He was in there alone, sitting moodily by the window, and there was no light in the room, saving what came from the street gas-lamp outside, through the muslin curtains and the white blind. Even in that uncertain light I could see the traces of suffering—his pale face, his disordered hair and his swollen eyes.

"Oh, Hester, Hester!" he exclaimed, coming forward and taking both my hands, "this is dreadful."

I cannot remember all that passed. I believe I asked to see her ; I asked particulars about her death, and I wept with him.

It was already known beyond doubt that the cause of her death was poison. She had dined at one o'clock and had lain down on the bed after it to sleep, as was usual since her illness : some toast-and-water stood at the bed-side ; and when she awoke thirsty, and asked for drink, the nurse gave her this. She drank it, complained of its bitter taste, fell into convulsive pains and soon after died.

"Could anything have been put into the toast-and-water ?" I exclaimed.

"So it would appear," he answered ; "but it is a great mystery."

"Then, Matthew Goring," I rejoined, peering steadily at him, "who can have put it in ?"

"I know not," he answered earnestly.

“As the Lord liveth and looketh down upon me, Hester, I am as ignorant and innocent of this business as you are.”

“Where was Miss Howard at the time?”

“Hester,” he gravely said, “you are prejudiced against Miss Howard, but for the love of justice do not carry it so far as to cast this suspicion upon her. A gentlewoman of character, of refined feeling; and you would point to her as being guilty of a crime black as night!”

“It is you who are blindly prejudiced in her favour,” I replied to him. “I do think, if she were proved guilty of this, *you* would not believe it.”

“I should not,” was Matthew’s avowal. “Not from any reason you hint at, but because I feel her to be utterly incapable of even thinking of such a crime, much less committing it. But pray do not continue to suspect me of undue preference for her,

Hester. If, as you once hinted, she caused uneasiness to my dear wife, I wish, to my soul, she had never come inside the house."

"Ay, that's always the case—repentance when it is too late. Many a man would be more careful not to give his wife cause for anxiety, if he thought he was soon to lose her." I could not help saying that: it was in my thoughts, so out it came.

I did suspect Miss Howard: and many a time, since, have I prayed to be forgiven if I suspected her wrongly: but, alas! I suspect her still. In Dr. Goring's present mood, it was of no use harping upon it. I went upstairs with him, into his chamber. My ill-fated sister was lying there, on the bed where I had left her the previous morning, getting well; and now she was cold and lifeless.

"Will there be an inquest?" I asked, when I could check my tears.

"It will be held to-morrow," he replied.

"She does not look as though she had died from poison," I said, gazing on her calm, pale features. "What poison was it?"

"Strychnia. The traces have been detected in her, and also in the toast-and-water remaining in the glass."

"Matthew," I said, looking at him, "you pointed that very poison out to Miss Howard the other day, in your surgery. I was halting at the door to come in, and heard what you said."

"True. She was asking me the names of various articles, and that amongst the rest. I remember it."

"Could the poison which has destroyed *her* have come from that bottle?"

"Hester, I know no more than you where the poison came from," he replied, his tones full of mourning and anguish; "I wish I did know. The phial stands in the same place

in the surgery, and appears not to have been touched."

"What name is it that you call it?"

"It was a preparation of strychnia."

"That must be a new poison. I never heard of it."

"It is but little known, excepting to medical men."

The sick-nurse, Mrs. Gill, gave me the most explicit account of the awful business. As I was leaving the death chamber with Dr. Goring, she was passing, and I turned back into it with her. He went downstairs. She was a good old soul, but very unsuspicious.

"My poor missis had dined sumptuously, ma'am, for her appetite was a-coming back to her, as you know. The wing and breast of a roast fowl, and a bit of bacon, and parsley-and-butter, and some porter. Dr. Goring ran up, when he had done carving for them in the parlour, with a decanter of

port wine in his hand. 'Some glasses, Mrs. Gill,' he said, and I brought 'em to him, and he poured out the wine. My missis drank one glass, and he drank two : he wanted her to have another, and said it wouldn't hurt her, but she said, No, not as she had taken the porter. So he left the decanter on the mantelpiece, and told me to be sure and give her a glass about seven in the evening, if he was not in, himself. Then she laid down on the bed for her afternoon's sleep, and he leaned over her and gave her a kiss—for, if he did—ahem !—if he did admire other faces, he was a most tender man to his wife—and he went downstairs. I followed him, to go to my dinner, only stopping to pour out a glass of toast-and-water, and put it by my missis, as I always did in the afternoon. Sometimes she would drink it all, and sometimes she'd not drink any of it, but she liked it to be there. Well, ma'am, I went down,

shutting the bedroom door after me, to keep out the noise. I didn't hurry over my dinner, and that's the truth, for I thought my missis would be asleep and wouldn't want me, and I know it must have been a-getting on for three when I got back upstairs. The bedroom door was not closed then, only pushed to, so I knew somebody had been in the room: in my own mind, I supposed it was Miss Mary. I stole in, and looked at my missis: she was sleeping sweetly—here, ma'am, on her own side of the bed. Well, I went and stood for a minute at the window, and there I saw Mrs. Cox's carriage come a-rattling down the street, with her and Miss in it. It stopped at our door, and their great oaf of a footboy got down, and gave such a peal upon the knocker as shook the house. My missis started up in a fright. 'What's that noise, nurse?' she called out; 'any of the children hurt?' 'Bless you, no, ma'am,'

says I, 'it's that dratted knocker. I wish folks wouldn't come a-noising and calling here, when people's asleep as wants sleep.' And for nothing, it weren't, but to leave a card, for the carriage and Mrs. and Miss druv off again. 'Try and doze a bit more, ma'am,' I said. 'I don't know,' said my missis; 'I think I am thoroughly aroused. Give me some toast-and-water, nurse, I am thirsty.' 'That's the bacon, ma'am,' I said, and handed her the glass of toast-and water, which stood ready on the little table by the bedside where I had put it. She drank it nearly all. 'It's as bitter as gall, Mrs. Gill,' she exclaimed; 'what have you done to it?' 'Bitter?' I said, 'why, I made it with my own two sinful hands this morning, and I'm sure the bread weren't burnt. It was not bitter before dinner.' With that I turned to the jug, which stood atop of the drawers, and poured a drop into one of the wineglasses,

after rinsing the drain of port wine out, and tasted it. And I felt then that missis's mouth must be out of taste, for it was not bitter at all, but sweet, fresh toast-and-water. I did not say so, for it ain't my place, ma'am, to contradict my ladies' fancies, and they weak and ill, but was a-going to wash out the two wineglasses, when I saw missis a-gasping on the bed. I rang the bell furiously, a deal longer and fiercer than that blundering footboy had pealed upon the knocker, and Dr. Goring, who was a-smoking in the arbour——"

"Smoking where?" I asked.

"In the arbour, ma'am, the summer-house in the garden. He heard the ringing and came flying up. Susan came at the same time, and Miss Mary came. Oh, ma'am, I can hardly tell you what happened next: my missis was in dreadful agony, and the room was full of confusion, servants and children

crowding out and in. Dr. Goring was the first to call out that she must have been poisoned, and the other doctors, when they came, said the same. They could not save her, and before five she was gone. Poor Miss Mary took on the least, to look at, but she felt it, I saw, more than any of them, except her father. It was me as whispered her to send for you, and she wrote a line, standing up, and Susan tore off with it, without a bonnet, and without a stamp, that she might save the post. I thought it right that you should be here, ma'am."

"Quite right," I said. "But now, Nurse Gill, answer me a serious question. How, and when, could the poison have been administered to Mrs. Goring?"

"When she drank the toast-and-water, ma'am," was the old woman's unhesitating reply. "I put my finger into the little that was left in the glass and tasted it, and sure

enough it was as bitter as wormwood. Dr. Goring tasted it also after me, and told me to tie a bladder over it, and locked it up in my cupboard till the doctors came : he said there was poison in it. The doctors have got it now ; they tasted it when I gave it to them, and they called the poison by a hard name, and Dr. Goring said he had some of the same sort of poison in his surgery."

"Nurse, how could the poison have got into the glass?"

"Why, ma'am, it couldn't have got there of its own accord, so it must have been put in ; but if you hung me I never could guess who by. Who in this house would do such a thing ? None of us. If we could only find out who had been in the room !"

"Where was Dr. Goring?"

"Smoking in the arbour, ma'am, as I told you. When I followed him downstairs, as I was a-going to my dinner, I saw him stroll up

the garden, and go into it, with his case of cigars and a newspaper. He was a-lighting a cigar as he went."

"Was he alone?"

"Quite alone, ma'am. The day afore, the two young gentlemen was with him, but they was both out yesterday. Master Goring had went spending the day in the country at the Halliwells', and young Alfred had went to school, for I see him from this window a-racing off to it, just as his papa came up with the wine."

"Could Dr. Goring have come in from the garden without being seen? Of course, Nurse Gill, you will not think I suspect him, in thus questioning," I proceeded; "but by throwing all possible light upon the movements of the house at that moment, we may obtain some clue to the real criminal."

"In course, ma'am," acquiesced the nurse, "nobody would be so wicked or so silly as to

doubt Dr. Goring. A better husband never lived, barring a little bit of joking and talking that he is fond of having with the ladies—and most men are alike for that, so far as I see. He could not have come in without our seeing him, for our dinner-table was close to the window, and we had full view of the garden. Unless,” added the nurse slowly, as if debating the point with herself, “he had come down the little path leading to the surgery ; but then some of us must have seen him come out of the arbour and cross to it. No, ma’am, he could not have come out at all.”

“ But you are not sure ?” I urged.

“ I would not swear it, but I’m morally sure,” was her reply. “ Rely upon it, ma’am, he never stirred out of that summer-house till I rang the bell and brought him rushing upstairs.”

“ Then let us go on again,” I said. “ As-

suming that it could not be Dr. Goring or the servants ——"

"I'll be upon my oath, ma'am, if necessary," interrupted the nurse, "that not a servant left the kitchen."

"The servants or the children," I proceeded, as if she had not broken the thread of my sentence, "there is no one else in the house—but Miss Howard."

"Dear ma'am," uttered Nurse Gill, "you'd never go to suspect her! A handsome young lady—though not over young, maybe, for the matter of that—clever, educated, plays and sings like a cherrybim, and with her mild, quiet voice—I'd as soon think it was myself as her."

"I was only asking about the position of those in the house, if you remember, not talking of suspicion, nurse. Do you know where Miss Howard was whilst you were at dinner?"

“She was in the dining-room all the while, as I believe, and she never came out of it. Miss Mary can tell you the same, ma’am, if you’ll please to have her called in.”

“Will she be afraid to come in here?”

“Not she, ma’am. She has been in ten times, poor thing, a-sobbing over her mamma. She is either in the nursery or with Miss Howard, I suppose. I’ll go and find her.”

Mary came in. When her surprise—for Susan had not told her of my arrival—and her first burst of tears were over, I began to question her.

“Mary,” I said, “I am trying to ascertain in what part of the house you all were yesterday, during Mrs. Gill’s absence at dinner. Your papa was in the garden; the servants were in the kitchen; the boys were out; and you and little Jane, nurse says, were in the nursery.”

“Yes, aunt, we were. Miss Howard had

been in a passion with Jane at the morning's lessons, and she ordered her into the nursery, and sent her a piece of dry bread for dinner. I thought it was a shame, for it was only Miss Howard's temper that was in fault—but it has been very bad since she knew she must leave—and when papa rose from the dinner-table to go to mamma's room, Alfred ran off to school, and I went up in the nursery to take Jane some cherries, leaving Miss Howard in the dining-room."

"Did you see nothing of Miss Howard, after that, before the alarm?"

"Oh yes. I went downstairs almost directly for some more cherries. She was still in the dining-room, netting, and I remember she complained of Alfred, and said he was a careless boy and had gone to school without washing his hands. I then went back to the nursery, and stayed there till nurse and baby came up from dinner."

“The nursemaid, she means, ma’am,” interrupted Nurse Gill. “She left the kitchen as I did, and we both came up the stairs together. Baby—as they still call little John—had dropped asleep over his dinner, and she was a-going to lay him down. I say he sleeps too much for a child of three years old.”

“And when the nursemaid went up, you went down,” I remarked to Mary. “Where was Miss Howard then?”

“Still netting in the dining-room, Aunt Hester; and she looked as if she had not stirred from her seat. Soon afterwards mamma’s bell rang violently.”

“I won’t say as she had not stirred from her seat, for I don’t know nothing about that,” broke in Mrs. Gill, “but I will say as she had not left the room, for, if she had, we must have heard her in the kitchen.”

"Did you hear no one go up or down-stairs?" I inquired.

"Not a soul," replied the woman, "and we had the kitchen door open. The house seemed as still as it is at this moment. If this dreadful thing had not happened, I could have been upon my oath that nobody had been near the stairs."

"You heard Miss Mary, when she came down for the cherries?"

"Of course, ma'am, we heard her; that was just as we were beginning dinner. We heard her come out of the nursery, run down the stairs, go into the dining-room, stop there a minute, run up again, and shut the nursery door. You shut it with a bang, Miss Mary, and I said to the servants that missis had not had time to get to sleep, or it might have woke her."

"Still—talking, as you all no doubt were, over your dinner, Mrs. Gill—I think you

could not have heard quiet footsteps on the stairs. And whoever did this deed, did not, you may be sure, go about it with noisy ones."

"Ma'am, we was unusually still. The cook — though, of course, you have not heard of it—had just had bad news. Her brother was at his mason's work atop of a house, and the ladder fell with him, and it was feared both his legs was broke. They had been to tell her of it, and she was as low as could be, though she weren't a-crying, and we was all sorry for her, and I can assure you we eat our dinners in silence, and there was hardly a word spoke. Sometimes there's enough talking and laughing going on with 'em, but there wasn't yesterday. I was just a-going to tell the news to my poor missis, when she was took."

"You heard nothing, Mary?" I said to her.

"Nothing at all, Aunt Hester. And we were quiet also in the nursery. Jane was eating the cherries, and I was reading."

"You see, ma'am, it's a complete mystery," observed Nurse Gill.

It did indeed seem so, and I could not fathom it. I took an opportunity of asking Dr. Goring whether he had come in from the harbour or not, after going there.

"I never left it," he replied. "I had my cigars, and had stretched myself at ease on the bench, reading the county paper. The violent ringing of Mary's bell aroused me, and I ran in."

Oh yes, yes, I am sure he spoke the truth. I did not suspect Dr. Goring, for to commit a cruelty or a crime was foreign to Matthew's nature.

The coroner's inquest was held, but it failed to throw any light upon the mystery. Amongst the witnesses examined was Miss

Howard. She deposed that she had been in the dining - room the whole time the nurse was at dinner, shut in there, and that she had heard nothing. Suspicion did not fall upon her, except in my own heart, and I could not openly accuse her. There were no proofs whatever. The verdict returned was, "Died from poison ; but by whom administered there is no evidence to show."

On the day but one afterwards my dear sister was buried. The churchyard was so crowded with spectators that the clergyman could scarcely push his way through them, as he walked at the head of the coffin ; and at the conclusion of the service, as the mourners were leaving the grave, a hiss arose from the crowd—they were hissing Dr. Goring. He, his sons, Matthew and Alfred, and Mr. Halliwell (Tom Halliwell, as we once called him, but his father was dead now—ah ! Mary had better have had

Tom, than have come to this dreadful ending) were the chief mourners, but several friends had followed. Matthew had gone direct to school from Mr. Halliwell's with a son of his, the very evening of his mother's death, but he was sent for to attend the funeral. He was a handsome, merry boy of fourteen, very like his father. Alfred was ten. I shall never forget poor Dr. Goring when he came in from the funeral. The lads went upstairs, but he came into the darkened dining-room where I was, and throwing his hat with its long crape streamers on a chair, sat down and sobbed as if his heart would break. I was not crying then, myself; I think I had cried so much that my eyes, for the moment, were drained dry, and I went up to him and begged him to be composed. "Hester," he sobbed; "Hester, they have been hissing me at Mary's grave. As you stand there, it is truth."

“Who has hissed you?” I asked.

“The mob in the churchyard. They whispered ‘Murderer.’ God knows I have not deserved it. If my dear wife was murdered, it was not by me. I would have given my life to prolong hers.”

I thought it best not to talk just then, and he grew composed after a while, though, I must say, his face was full of suffering and sorrow; but at night, when the candles were lighted and we were alone again, the children being in bed, I inquired what he meant to do.

“In what way?” he asked.

“About your children, and your house-keeping matters. Who is to conduct your house?”

“Oh, Hester, I cannot think of these things. They must take their chance. Unless you can put them on some sort of footing before you go again.”

I tried to do so. I saw Miss Howard out of the house (with a true thanksgiving) and I established Mary as housekeeper. Though only fifteen, she was so sensible and steady a girl that I had no fear of leaving her as such ; and she was to go as morning pupil to Miss Sherwood's school, till her education was completed. Matthew and Alfred were placed, together, at a less expensive establishment than the one Matthew had hitherto been in, and the little fellow, John, I consigned to Susan, who undertook the charge of him. I would have taken Jane back with me, but Matthew said he could not be deprived of wife and children at once. Then I induced Matthew to lay down the carriage, and discharge the coachman and two of the maids, and make a reduction in many other ways. Altogether, I did what I could, and left for home, with many words of advice to Mary, an injunction to her to write to me

weekly, and a promise to go down at Christmas.

I have said that I think none, save myself, suspected Miss Howard : certainly not any of the immediate family : but there were whispers in the town as to Dr. Goring, though I am sure he did not merit them. People hinted at the windfall that insurance money was to him ; and his practice, for the moment, fell off considerably. None knew, I dare say none ever will know, the truth of this mysterious crime ; it happened in silence and secrecy, and so it remains buried. Sometimes, in my dreams, I see Miss Howard standing, barefooted, by a bedside, on which lies a happy wife, sleeping calmly. I see her leaning over a small table, with a phial in her hand, and I see her drop something from it into a glass which stands there. Then I see her steal away with a breathless caution, and glide down the stairs in silence,

till she comes to a room where many bottles and jars, on shelves, and chemical tubes, lie about, and I see her mount a chair softly, and put that phial into its place in a corner, and then she creeps back again to a large sitting-room close by, closes the door with cat-like stillness, thrusts her feet into her shoes, sits down and takes up some work. And I have noted the form of Dr. Goring hovering near, and sometimes he seems to look on approvingly through all; then I notice that he is stone-blind, and cannot see as I do. And I awake, shivering and comfortless, and cry out with horror and pain, as I did that fearful morning when I received Mary Goring's letter, and then I remember that it is all a dream and that I am very foolish.

But I know one thing; and I will speak out my sentiments, and people may call me an old maid for them if they will. If I had

the handling of these women-serpents, these single females, who come envying and trying to destroy the wedded happiness which they have never been asked to share, I would cause them to be paraded through the town on a market day, in a white garment, according to the former custom of doing penance, and then have them privately whipped. For when they insinuate their treacherous arts between man and wife, they are deliberately flying in the face of a divine command: "THOSE WHOM GOD HATH JOINED TOGETHER, LET NOT MAN PUT ASUNDER."

END OF VOL. II.

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